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Great Minds On Music: An Interview With Sir John Hegarty On Music In Advertising

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“...truth is one of the most powerful forces in communication. Great musicians find a truth, they tap into a feeling that resonates, that you believe in. – Sir John Hegarty

For more than six decades, [Sir John Hegarty](#) has been at the forefront of the creative advertising industry. Born and bred in North London, Hegarty was studying painting when his teacher suggested he go to what was then the London College of Printing to study graphic design. He started in advertising as a junior Art Director at Benton and Bowles in 1965. Two years later, he joined Charles Saatchi, leaving Saatchi & Saatchi in 1973 to co-found TBWA, London. In 1982, Hegarty, along with partners John Bartle and Nigel Bogle, gave birth to [Bartle Bogle Hegarty](#) (BBH), where he continues to serve as Chairman & Worldwide Creative Director. His iconic work includes “[Vorsprung Durch Technik](#)” for Audi, and Levi’s “[Bath](#)” and “[Launderette](#)”.

Over the course of his career, Hegarty has taken home more than 15 Clio’s (his Levi’s 501 work is in the Clio Hall of Fame), 8 D&AD awards, and almost too many Cannes Lions awards to count. He has been given the D&AD President’s Award for outstanding achievement and was admitted to the US One Show Advertising Hall of Fame. As if that weren’t enough, Sir John has also been voted one of the most influential people in fashion thanks to his work with Levi’s. To which we can only say, “Well played, Sir, well played.”

Uli Reese, an award winning composer songwriter and producer for Hollywood and leading brands, interviewed Hegarty recently about the role of music in advertising as part of Reese’s thesis research for an executive MBA at [The Berlin School of Creative Leadership](#). (Hegarty [has been a friend of the school](#) and [delivered lectures](#) to its students.) Here is an edited excerpt of the conversation:

Uli Reese: How important is music in building a brand?

John Hegarty: I would answer that in a slightly different way. Music is incredibly powerful when it’s part of a message which in turn is helping to build a brand. Brands are built out of stories. Of course they begin with the product – but the brand, what it means to people, how they respond to it, is built out of stories about that brand: where it comes from, who founded it, its vision... and you can communicate those things in a number of different ways. Film is one of them – and in that context music is fundamentally important.

Reese: Agreed.

Hegarty: It’s hard to overestimate how important it is. Music can transform a message. It doesn’t transform the narrative structure – but it can change the meaning of that structure. So why is that? The thing about music is that it’s an almost purely emotional medium. A tune can have absolutely no meaning apart from the emotional response to it. A story has to have a meaning, a structure. In music the meaning is absolutely connected to your soul and your heart – it’s just something you feel.

Reese: It’s true that songs don’t need a narrative.

Hegarty: As James Stephens says in his wonderful book *The Crock of Gold*, “what the heart feels today the head will know tomorrow”. In other words, we’re emotional creatures. We take in information through the heart – and that’s where music goes in. That’s what makes it so powerful.

Reese: Can it change consumer behavior?

Hegarty: Oh, totally. Absolutely. It can make you want to be associated with something; feel a connection with it. I mean, you don’t listen to a piece of music and say “Oh, I’m going to buy that new Audi.” But in the message you’ve created, the right piece of music can change the way a person feels or thinks about it. For a long time we worked on the Levi’s 501 campaign... Music was obviously very important to that. Once we had a narrative about a young man staying at this hot and stuffy little boarding house in the US somewhere. He comes down in the morning in his boxers and standing behind the counter is this beautiful girl – obviously the owner’s daughter. In the script we wrote: “Has he slept with her?” Anyway, he goes behind the counter and takes his jeans out of the fridge. It’s so hot he’s been keeping his jeans there. Originally we wanted to use James Brown’s “It’s a Man’s Man’s Man’s World”...

Reese: An you managed to get it?

Hegarty: Trouble was, it didn’t work. With that music, the guy’s acting looked terrible, he seemed to plod down the stairs. I really had a problem with it. Then one of those great coincidences happened. The client rang and said we couldn’t use the James Brown track, it’s being used by a brand in Belgium. So we had to think again. Soon the editor called me and

said: “Come over, I want to play something to you.” Without changing the cut, he’d laid across it “Mannish Boy” by Muddy Waters. And that transformed the edit. All of a sudden the way the guy walked made sense, it had a sexual tension about it, it dialed up the relationship between these two young people. The film went from being okay to being outstanding, without changing a thing. That’s the power of music.



English: Blues artist Muddy Waters at the opening of Peaches Records & Tapes in Rockville, MD (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

Reese: Is there a way of making that happen? Is it just instinct? Or luck?

Hegarty: I have a theory that, actually, a piece of film has an unseen rhythm to it. And what the music does is capture that rhythm and enhance it. The rhythm comes from the way it’s shot, the acting, the way it’s edited. The music has to connect to that, while the lyrics should add some kind of meaning. It can be a loose connection. We did a fairly famous commercial for Levi’s called “Launderette”...

Reese: Sure, the guy stripping down to his boxers in the laundry.

Hegarty: I wanted to put “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” on it, even though people told me it was too fast, it wouldn’t work. I insisted because I wanted to say to the audience: “There’s a message about this brand that I want you to listen to.” There was a loose connection with the lyrics, but not too obvious. And it somehow found the rhythm of the film. So: find the connection between the music and the story, then find the rhythm of the piece. But having said all that, it’s elusive.

Reese: Did you ever sit down and write an audio style guide for Levi’s? Was there a set of rules about handling music on the brand?

Hegarty: No – we didn’t. We talked about it, because we used to burn our brains out trying to get the right music for each film. But we always wanted to be surprising. The problem with 501s was that we were in the fashion business, but we were selling a product that stayed the same. So each ad had to be a new fashion statement. In a sense, when you bought a new pair of 501s, you were buying the ad. It worked like a fashion show: this is the new look. It had to be a different story, expressed in a new way, with a very different piece of music. If we had written a style guide, we would have fallen into a formula. And then we would have been dead.

Reese: The formula was that there was no formula.

Hegarty: The formula was to surprise ourselves. Sometimes we had to fight for our ideas. For a film called “Swimmer” we put on “Mad About the Boy,” a Noel Coward song sung by Dinah Washington. Levi’s were concerned that it wasn’t fashionable enough. But we told them: “You’re the trendsetter. If you use this song, it will be fashionable.” I remember there was a great concern in France, where the ads were primarily shown on MTV. Later we heard that Levi’s was getting amazing results in France – because kids loved the ad on MTV. We had to constantly push the envelope. If we had decided, “It always has to be R&B”, the whole thing would have collapsed.

Reese: There is no question music can affect consumer behavior and positively impact a brand. We have the quantitative data to prove it. But putting a monetary value on music...really knowing how much it’s worth... continues to be a question. Should there be a way of defining return on investment when it comes to music? So that the right budget can be devoted to it?

Hegarty: Fortunately, with Levi’s we had a client who realized that they had to invest in music – we won that battle. In fact we got to the point where record companies knew that if their track went onto a Levi’s commercial, they would sell huge amounts of CDs. We could almost negotiate a cut of the extra sales.

Reese: So everyone was on your side.

Hegarty: You have to say to the client, “Give us the time and the budget to get the music right.” I’ve had many clients who balked at going over budget for a track – even though it was going to make the film 10 or 20 times better. Bear in mind they’ve already spent half a million making it, and they’re then going to spend another \$10 or \$15 million getting it out there. Why wouldn’t they spend a bit more on a piece of music that will make it brilliant? It’s because most clients want communication to be a science. If you could give them a precise formula that would guarantee a certain result, they would love it. They don’t like the fact that salesmanship is an art.

Reese: So you have to sell it to them first.

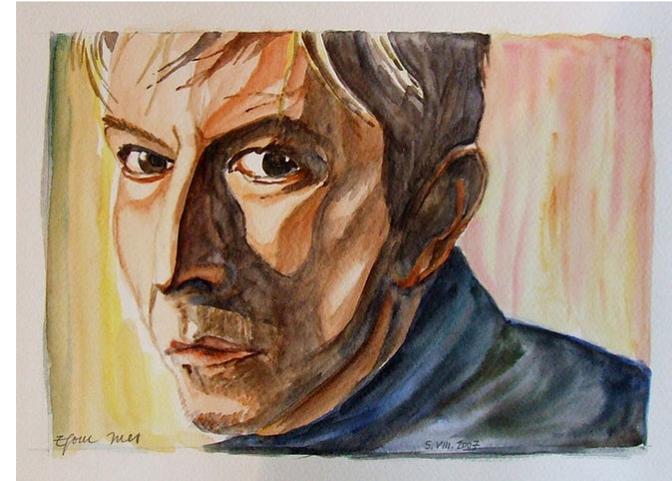
Hegarty: You can tell them that, based on your experience, it should work, but you can't show them the ROI figures in advance. All you can do is say: "This track will make the film brilliant." But even though it's a paltry amount within the overall budget, they won't spend the money. Because they don't feel that difference. And it is about feel.

Reese: If I could offer you a way to measure the return on investment on music in a branded environment, predictively, would you want that?

Hegarty: Yes, but I'm not sure I'd really believe it to be absolutely honest. I'm always trying to do something different – I believe in the power of difference. And the problem with measurement is that it looks backwards: "We did this and this, and the result was this – so we should do the same." But life changes. The world changes. The piece of music that was perfect back then may be irrelevant now. A lot of successful companies fail because at a certain point they just keep on doing the same thing.

Reese: Do you believe that brands should develop a recognizable sonic identity? Like McDonald's and Intel, for example?

Hegarty: Well, you have a conflict there between: "I recognize you, but I want to be surprised you." Predictability can be good, but the danger of that is that I start to ignore you. I worry that as soon as brands start to lay down guidelines, as opposed to emotions, they begin to diminish peoples' desire to find out more about them. By trying to contain your communication, you begin to undermine its impact...if you look at the most interesting musicians in history, they're all about change. The Beatles – if you listen to Sergeant Pepper and compare it to their earlier albums, it sounds like a totally different band. Or David Bowie. There's a Bowie attitude, but there's no specific Bowie style. If Bowie had a signature tune that he rolled out all the time...kind of boring.



The portrait of David Bowie like I see him. So, it's the different view, like the name of picture is. Watercolour. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

Reese: So you're not a fan of mnemonics, like Coca-Cola (hums the mnemonic).

Hegarty: I'm thinking of the British Airways musical signature...it makes them feel very establishment. Of course, if you want to be part of the establishment, that's fine.

Reese: One final question. To put it in the terms of the music industry, how do you know when you've got a hit? When you look at a piece of creativity, how do you decide: "This is it, this has got the magic."

Hegarty: Well, that is the question, isn't it? I would say there are two things that happen. The truth. And daring. The truth is one of the most powerful forces in communication. Great musicians find a truth, they tap into a feeling that resonates, that you believe in. And the other is to be daring. To say something new, totally unexpected. When I'm looking at work I ask two questions: Is there truth in this – and is it daring? If you have those two things, you have a chance of creating something special.

Uli Reese is President of [iV and iV2](#), audio agencies based in Nashville, TN, and Frankfurt, Germany