



# MAD MEN IN AFRICA

By Philip Clayton-Thompson  
Guest Columnist

How, you might ask, did a British-born national, who doubled as a smudge photographer in Wales before becoming a documentary filmmaker in London, wind up running a boutique ad agency in Portland several decades later? Well, once an agency bloke, always one.

Why do you think AMC's *Mad Men* is such a runaway hit? Because Madison Avenue was king in the '60s. We Brits used to drool over the American ad campaigns. *Mad Men*'s Cooper Sterling got taken over by a British company this season, and then got punk'd.

I felt the same way when a prospective client sent me a snotty e-mail after receiving one of our promos in a black plastic envelope. The young "greener" complained that the envelope was not recyclable. I suppose being in Portland, I should have sent it in a paper bag!

I remember the day I found the envelope in question in the Paper Zone. I was surrounded by 10 tons of paper, but all I saw was this shiny, smooth, black plastic envelope. I stand transfixed with the sweat trickling down my back, heat stroke consuming me. I look out at the rain coming down in sheets on MLK. Niagara Falls is right outside the window, swallowing up Martin Luther King Boulevard. But all I see is my life in Africa.

Voices around me morph into Afrikaans and I realize I'm in Johannesburg, South Africa. *Ja, Man...* I am back in Joburg, where I emigrated

at the cost of 10 Pounds, after being the Tea Boy and Letraset Filer in an ad agency in Cardiff, Wales, where I was considered the junior-most account exec for their only decent account: Cambrian Airways.

But I digress. It's hot as blazes, and I'm standing outside the ad agency I've joined in Joburg. The sun is attacking my head like a knife, but I'm happy. I've moved up in the world, promoted to "Beer Boy." I'm climbing the back stairs with two dozen bottles of Castle Beer, hoping the bosses won't see. I fall through the door, where I'm met by hands grabbing the liquid lunch. The account exec grabs three, and I'm left with none. This room in Bramfontein—a posh section of Joburg—is the size of a Penny Black.

Talk about odd man out. I'm the token English sod. They all chat in Afrikaans, trying to come up with an ad campaign for Whitbread beer. There's always the account guy who shifts into Zulu, proving he has special expertise in understanding the Bantu market. The only thing he knows about an African is he's black. He's as close to understanding the African as I am the Eskimo. Man, it's hot. We should all be sitting naked with wet towels covering our privates.

Everyone is smoking. Charles, in paste up, smiles through the briny fog, flicking ashes toward his feet, which are crossed at the ankles.

"Hey, Royneck!" (That's me in Afrikaans) "Do you want a warm 'Whitbread' beer?" The art director throws it across the room. I miss. I didn't play much cricket. The damn thing is empty!

"How do you sell a beer like 'Whitbread'?" he says. "Who drinks this English crap?"

If it gets any hotter, I'm ready to disrobe.

"How about Swaziland Independence? The king drinks 'Whitbread' beer to satisfy his taste and his 40 wives," says an exec.

"No, not the 40 wives, they're off limits," says another.

There is a small window of opportunity. I jump in.

"What about a plastic bag!" I say, "with a 'Whitbread' logo and Swazi flag."

"Right. The Swazi goes shopping, picks up a plastic bag. No wonder you Limey bastards lost the Empire. Maybe you should mosey over to the Bulawayo office. That's where they stick you toffee nosed Englishmen."

"He's from Blackpool. You know there are no brains North of Watford," says Reginald, one of the execs.

"Okay, so tell us Boars, what's your great idea?"

(Look for Part II of "Mad Men in Africa" in Issue 6 of Media Inc.)

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# MAD MEN IN AFRICA Pt. II

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(Continued from Media Inc. Issue 5)

We left off in a Joberg, South Africa, advertising agency... "Okay, so tell us Boars, what's your great idea?" the exec asks me.

"There are two things the Africans would like," I answer. "A Raleigh bike or an empty five-gallon Castrol oil can. Since we can't afford to give away bikes with every pint, then let's sell the Swazis 'Whitbread' beer in shiny black plastic bags with the Swazi flag emblazoned on it, so they can use it to carry water."

Cigarette smoke hangs like a mist on the Lancashire moors. I catch the execs winking at one another. I know I'm about to get shanghai'd. "You had that idea a couple of weeks ago, right, Frank?"

"Ja, Reggie! Thanks for reminding me."

The Joberg sunset casts dark shadows across the cityscape. I'm thinking Frank couldn't organize a piss up in a brewery. The paste up man taps my shoulder. "I guess we won't be shunting you off to Bulawayo to redesign their police logo after all. You've got some good ideas to steal."

I'm going to Durban to visit a friend on my 350cc Triumph bike. I set out early. Suddenly, the tire pops and I become a close friend of the tarmac, rolling, sliding, scraping skin against road, skidding all the way to Durban. When we finally come to a standstill, the bike's totaled. I try to thumb a lift. Trucks, cars, buses pass. Then, darkness. This is not where you should be alone in the Transvaal. I'm just about to give up when a car pulls over. Probably an Afrikaaner. When he finds out I'm English, he'll surely pull away. He opens the passenger door. He's African. My face goes even whiter, given the harshness of Apartheid.

"I can take you as far as Durban," he says.

We set off across Africa. I'm stunned by the beauty of the rich pigment of the driver's Zulu skin. I open the window. The car is filled with a cacophony of sounds as we float across the Veldt. All my pains from grinding and scraping against the tarmac have gone.

I don't see it coming. The Devil appears at a road block ahead. Afrikaaners looking for city Zulus to beat up and steal their cars. I've heard about this. The Zulus just vanish, never to be heard from again. No doubt they think it would be nice to throw in an Englishman to boot.

"Why is that Kaffer driving? Why are you sitting in the front seat?" asks the Afrikaaner.

"I'm Afrikaans! This is my Kaffer boy," I say. "He can't work a stick shift, so I have to do it."

Just to prove it, I curse in Afrikaans, using words I've learned in the agency meetings. Trouble is the only other words I know are agency-related like Bristol Board, Paste Up, and Letraset.

"I'm Afrikaans, really!" The words are running out. "Screw the British, *Jurrri, man!*" I say, rolling my "Rs" as only the Afrikaans can.

We pull away. Don't speak for half an hour. As we come to a steep climb, the Zulu asks casually, "Can you change the gear, Boss?"

We laugh all the way to Durban.

He stops at the center of the city. Before I get out, I ask, "Why did you pick me up?"



"Because one day you will help someone else. It's a simple approach to life."

"I never did catch your name."

"Nelson," he says.

He reaches into the back seat, pulls out a black shiny plastic bag, and fills it with fruit. "It will keep you going. The bag is a collector's item for The Independence Day of Swaziland. It holds water."

"Four gallons. Has reinforced handles made of the best plastic, was printed with the 'Whitbread' logo in Peter Maritsberg imported through India Imports in Cape Town."

"You know a lot about it."

"I should. The Afrikaaners stole it off me."

Nelson smiles. "One day you'll have to make one for South Africa's Independence Day. Right?"

I grin back at him. "Right, Boss."

Many years have passed since my days in Africa, but the thrill of running my own ad agency is just as fresh as the days I was pitching ideas as a "Beer Boy." Perhaps I should have told that disgruntled "greener" that she wasn't just looking at an unrecyclable black plastic envelope—she was witnessing the seeds of a whole country's independence.

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