

MAD MEN IN AFRICA

By Philip Clayton-Thompson

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, Oregon, 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 email 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. Paper is wonderful. There are so many different kinds, colors, and textures. However, even the touch of paper couldn't stop the malaise I felt that day, after 22 straight days of torrential Portland rains. Boy, did I need one of those sun lamps screwed to my head!

Then I saw it - this shiny, smooth, black plastic envelope. I stood 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 the only decent account was South Wales Gas Board. Well, there was Rumney Beers, and, hell, I was considered the junior-most account exec for Cambrian Airways.

Cambrian Airways had two - two very old Viscount Airline planes, which even paratroopers wouldn't board, because they were such a bucket of bolts. Cambrian flew punters to sunny Majorca on the cheap, where they had one week to get beet red before they returned to drizzly South Wales, looking like a bunch of red lobsters crammed cheek-by-jowl into rickety seats, chain-smoking, along with the swanky flight attendants, who were hocking Noxema lotion for 2 pounds a tube that they'd probably stolen from the fly-by-night fleabag hotels paid for by the airline. The only distraction from this nightmare was the sight of the cockpit door banging back and forward as high-heeled flight attendants chatted up the beer-bellied pilots.

While setting up my first big photo shoot for the illustrious Cambri-

an Airways, I met with misfortune when the only handsome, ex-group captain fighter pilot decided to go AWOL with one of the two planes, ditching it in Majorca to run off with a nude exotic Spanish sunbather, whose only clothing seemed to be a pair of castanets.

I could never see why they bothered to bring the plane back. They could have collected insurance money from Lloyds of London - where they love to "ring that bell." Instead, they sent a constable all the way to Majorca to track down the wayward pilot and force him to fly the clunker back. I think the constable located the pilot in minutes after arriving, but he claimed it took him a week to comb the beaches looking for him. I bet the nude sunbather had a sister with no tan lines, because the constable, while describing the difficulty he had investigating the missing pilot and plane, was sporting one helluva tan that went way past the lines of his uniform.

After that episode, the pilot was assigned to the Cardiff to Birmingham route with only enough fuel to get there and back, just to make sure he didn't make a sharp right turn when leaving Cardiff. All traces of his escapade vanished, by the way, including his glowing tan, in one rainy week in Wales.

But I digress. I was talking about emigrating to Joberg from Cardiff, where I joined an ad agency. It's hot as blazes, and I'm standing outside the agency. The sun is attacking my head like a knife as sharp as a Gillette razor, 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 in my arms, hoping not to meet the bosses. Don't want them to see how we're consuming our lunch. I fall through the door, where I'm met by hands grabbing the liquid lunch. The account exec grabs three for himself, and I'm left with none. This room in Bramfontien - a posh section of Joberg - is the size of a Penny Black: okay, for those non-stamp collectors - the size of a broom closet.

Talk about odd man out. I'm the token English sod. They all chat in Afrikaans. There's always the account guy who shifts into Zulu, proving he has special expertise in understanding the Bantu market. Christ, that idiot. 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. Of course, Charles in paste up would like that. He asked me if I liked opera. I didn't answer in case it was a trap. It's all hidden away in the late 70s. Everyone is smoking, even Charles who smiles through the briny fog, flicking his ashes toward his feet, which are crossed at the ankles. My god, that guy in copywriting can inhale a whole Peter Stuyvesant cigarette. He never seems to exhale. It must be coming out of his ears or his ass, I don't know. They should just stick me in a high chair in the corner and give me a rattle - that's how they treat me.

"We are in the shit, the deep shit," says the art director. "How do you

sell a shit beer like 'Whitbread?' Who the fuck drinks this English crap?"

If it gets any hotter, I'm ready to disrobe. To hell with the friendly chap in paste up. Enjoy life.

"Hey, Royneck! (That's me in Afrikaans, "The Englishman.") Do you want a weak, sad, warm "Whitbread" beer?" The art director throws it across the room. I miss it. I didn't play much cricket. I pick it up. At least it's a drink. Then I realize the damn thing is empty. It's a prop from the photo shoot.

Everyone else is gulping their cold Castle Beers as if they've just crossed the Sahara Desert. The strange thing is their underarm sweat is shaped like Africa. On Mr. Paste Up I can see Botswana. There's Kenya on Reginald, and Nigeria on Frank. Holy shit! If I ever get a beer, I'm only going to take quick sips. I bet my sweat looks like Blackpool.

"Okay," says one of the execs, "How about Swaziland Independence? The king drinks 'Whitbread' beer to satisfy his taste and his 40 wives."

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

I'm thinking shouldn't we be lashing each other with branches and throwing water around this sauna of a room? Looks like the Castle Beer is running out. That means another fucking trip down that flight of stairs and back up again. The room fills with more smoke.

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

"Plastic!" I say, "with a 'Whitbread' logo and Swazi flag."

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

"Come on, he's from Blackpool. You know there are no brains North of Watford," says Reginald.

"Okay, so tell us Boars, who beat the shit out of you and let Churchill escape so he could help you slope heads out in World War II - what's your great idea?"

So I tell them: "There are two things the Africans would like. A Raleigh bike or a five gallon Castrol oil can, which has more value empty than full to carry water. 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, which they can use to carry water or refill later with beer."

The smoke hangs like a mist on the Lancashire moors. I catch the execs

winking and nodding at one another.

"Frank, didn't you have that idea a couple of weeks ago?"

"Sure did! Thanks, Reggie, for reminding me. I mentioned it to you last Tuesday, didn't I?"

I glance out the window, watching a glowing Joberg sunset make deep, dark shadows creep across the cityscape. I'm thinking Frank couldn't organize a piss up in a brewery. We sidle out of the room. The paste up man says, "I guess we won't be shunting you off to Bulawayo to redesign their Police logo. You've got some good ideas to steal."

I'm going to Durban to visit a friend. I look it up. It's not far, 330 miles. My 350cc Triumph bike could make it without any trouble. I could probably make it there in a day.

I set out early. I'm doing an easy 60mph, having traveled at least half way by early afternoon. Suddenly, the tire just pops and I become a close friend of the tarmac, rolling, sliding, scraping skin against road. It feels like me and the bike are skidding all the way to Durban at 100mph. When we finally come to a standstill, the bike's all smashed up. I start to thumb a lift. Trucks pass. Cars pass. Buses pass. I hold out a handful of Rand, but no one stops. 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. It's got to be an Afrikaaner. When he finds out I'm English, he'll surely pull away. I wander up. He opens the passenger door. It's an African. I admit it. My face has gone even whiter with astonishment, given the harshness of Apartheid.

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

We set off across Africa. I look over at the driver, stunned by the beauty of the rich pigment of his Zulu skin. I open the window. Put my head out. As we float across the Veldt, the car is filled with a cacophony of sounds. All my pains from grinding and scrapping against the tarmac have gone.

I don't see it coming. The Devils appear at a road block 20 feet away - Afrikaaners looking for city Zulus to beat 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.

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

Just to prove it, I curse in Afrikaans, using all the words I've learned in the agency meetings. Trouble is the only other words I know in Afrikaans

are agency related like Bristol Board, Paste Up, Lettraset, Chrome coat, and block guides.

"I'm Afrikaans, really!" The 20 words I've learned are running out. "Fuck the British, Jurrarra, man!" I say, rolling my "Rs" as only the Afrikaans can. I'm pulling out all the stops.

We pull away. We don't say anything to one another for half an hour. We come to a steep climb, and he asks casually, "Can you change the gear, Boss?"

We laugh all the way to Durban.

Pulling into the center of the city, we stop at the post office. Just before I get out of the car, 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. I was there. It holds water."

I say, "Yes, four gallons. It has a re-inforced handle made of the best plastic. It was printed with the "Whitbread" logo in Peter Maritsberg imported through India Imports in Cape Town."

"You know a lot about it."

I chuckled. "I should. The Afrikaaners where I work 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."

If I had been quicker on my feet, I would have explained to that toffee nosed "greener," that it wasn't just an unrecyclable black plastic envelope she was looking at. It represented a whole country's independence.

Philip Clayton-Thompson is co-owner of the boutique ad agency Blackstone Edge Studios, which specializes in ad campaigns, web site design, film, documentaries, and extreme digital compositing. www.blackstoneedge.com