

Who needs bumper stickers when we have license plates?

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• I'm driving along Route 128 outside Boston with my mind operating just above the coma level, surrounded by the usual crashing roar of crazed Massachusetts drivers, when suddenly a guy in a green Toyota whistles by me and I notice his license plate: IM GAY. For a brief instant, I think it is an exotic plate from someplace like Taiwan, but no, it's a plain old domestic plate that I quickly file away in my growing collection.

The license plate is rapidly taking its place as one of America's more visible media of individual expression. This plate was the first I'd seen, however, that specifically advertised its owner's sexual orientation, although I did spot one a few months earlier that read AC-DC—possibly an electrician advertising his trade, though I doubt it . . . considering the fact that the driver was wearing pearl earrings and a pink carnation in his hair. That one was matched only by a New England plate bearing the strange device IN DRAG, which appeared on a car that seemed to be driven by a distinguished middle-aged lady. I say *appeared* to be.

A few years ago, an innocent Ohioan found to his total delight that his plates, when they arrived in the mail, spelled out a simple four-letter Anglo-Saxon word denoting the sexual act. He bolted the plates onto his otherwise commonplace Dodge, backed out of the driveway and got no farther than two and a half blocks before the axe fell. He spent the next nine hours in the slam trying to defend himself against charges of public indecency, flagrant immorality and inciting to riot. His claim that he had nothing to do with what his license plate read cut no ice whatsoever.

Chief: "You shoulda known you can't go around with no license plates sayin' that kind of stuff in this town, buddy. Not while I'm runnin' the department."

Driver: "They just come in the mail! All I did was bolt 'em on."

Chief: "You can read, stupid. All kinds of kids and old ladies are gonna see that plate. We got three calls about you in less than five minutes."

Driver: "I just figured it was some kind of new state code or something."

Chief: "You getting smart with me?"

Driver: "I like them plates. All the guys at work are gonna flip when they see 'em."

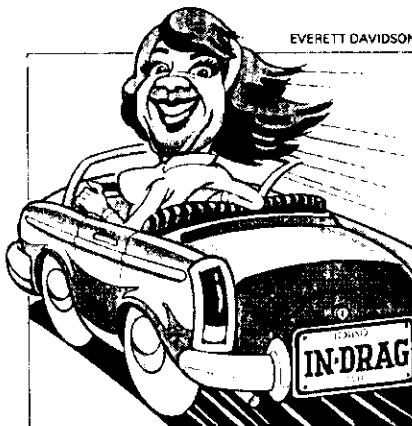
Chief: "They ain't gonna see 'em. We're issuing you temporaries, and I'm gonna see some asses burned at the DMV."

They spent a couple of weeks trying to figure out which convict turned out those historic plates, but they never got him. However, that was a few years ago, and now the floodgates are wide open.

I particularly collect plates that advertise the owner's individual likes or hang-ups: FUDGE, WHISKY, SKIING, WON TON, HUSKY and even one with HORSE in day-glo letters that could have meant the four-legged variety but—since the driver was wearing black shades and appeared very twitchy—I wonder. I saw a van with six guys with their hands in the air being frisked by a state cop in Florida. Its plate: FREAK. Truth in advertising doesn't always pay.

I have collected dozens of plates in the Basic Commodity category. These are quite rare, and usually advertise whatever it is the driver makes or sells: BEER, BREAD, MILK, BUTTER, WOOD, NAILS, SEPTIC—this on a truck devoted to sewer cleaning—ICE, TURKY and GOO.

My most prized category is my Ethnic or Racial Slur division. I have actually *collected*



these plates by verified sightings: SWEDE, GOOK, FROG, LIMEY, SPADE, WOG, WASP, KYKE, COON, RUSSKY, REDNEK, OKIE and one supremely golden moment when I was passed by a battered junker proudly bearing WOP fore and aft. That was matched only by POLACK, spotted in Jersey City.

I have a Miscellaneous category, which includes: ME SAD, REBATE, MEOW, Y BE ILL (a health freak), HOP IN, TELL ALL (No doubt an IRS man or a lawyer), NO TOY (on a VW), IM BUG (also a VW), HI IKE, SHLEP, HONEY and WAZOO.

All this jazzing up of license plates would have totally escaped my Old Man. He used to roar along in his Oldsmobile, keeping up a continuous stream of comments about the other drivers on the road, while my kid brother and I squatted in the back seat and soaked it up. He was from one of the tougher sections of South Chicago and had definite ideas about license plates. Here's a typical sample of his folk wisdom:

OLD MAN [Peering through his windshield at a passing black Lincoln]: "Take a look at that low number. That bastard must be some kind of big deal. Them politicians get all the low numbers. Look at that: 48 J. Boy, lemme tell you, though, they can have them low numbers. Forty-eight J. Probably some gangster who owns the governor. Lemme tell you, they couldn't give me one of those low plates. Any guy that has a plate like that is really asking for it. Ya know why? I'll tell ya why. They can spot ya a mile away. Y' run over a guy with 48 J, he can remember that with no trouble at all. Cop asks him who done it, and the guy layin' there on the street says, '48 J.' You could remember that if you was half dead. But now you take seven thirty-eight D L nine oh three six gee em two, I'd like to see 'em remember that. They'd never catch ya with a plate like that."

I have never forgotten this solid piece of true folk wisdom. I suppose guys who put IRV or HARRY or MURRY on their plates never think they may one day be fleeing into the night, but my Old Man never totally dismissed the possibility. He came from a generation and a background that always considered itself potentially on the lam. His motto in life was, basically, "Keep a low profile." And never advertise.

Our time, by contrast, is the age of both personal and civil jingoism. It's hardly possible today to buy a T-shirt that doesn't proclaim the owner's taste in beer, chewing gum, religion, dope, music or cars. Others testify to the beauty of your soul or the purity of your diet. Patriotic slogans have been part of the American license-plate scene for years. They range from ALASKA—NORTH TO THE FUTURE to IDAHO—FAMOUS POTATOES to NEW HAMPSHIRE—LIVE FREE OR DIE.

Most of the slogans are about scenery or geographical themes—GRAND CANYON STATE, SUNSHINE STATE, BAYOU STATE, VACATIONLAND—but no doubt the day is near when license plates will deal with themes of our time rather than such mundane preoccupations. NEW YORK—THE DEFAULT STATE is one suggestion. CONNECTICUT—TAXES AND MORE TAXES, GEORGIA—THE SPEED TRAP STATE, NEW HAMPSHIRE—THE LAND OF CHEAP BOOZE. But there are still a few brave souls among us. I saw a guy with a plate reading HONKY drive right through Times Square on a Saturday night. And if you don't think that took guts, you ought to try it sometime. ●