



PATRICK BEDARD

Yes, we have no radios.

• Archaeologists are always poking around in old caves and tombs, looking for signs of advanced civilization. They say you can tell just by reading the writing on the walls. I'll bet they'd have a terrific time in New York City. They wouldn't even have to dig. The signs are right on the street.

You see the best ones in the windows of Audis. Mercedes and BMW owners are too restrained. Audi owners are the kind that archaeologists would seek out, because they tell it exactly like it is. In big print, too. I was walking on First Avenue the other day, past New York University Hospital, when I spotted a sign of advanced civilization in the sloping back window of a sand-metallic 5000. It was written with a Magic Marker on butcher paper. It said, "No Radio of Any Kind Inside—Already Stolen." Another rendering just like it rested on top of the dashboard.

Such an all-encompassing denial was rare in itself. The verbal shrug at the end—too late, guy, too bad—made it a real find. Plain old "No Radio" signs are as common as parking tickets, sometimes two to a block. I'd seen so many, I began to suspect a trick. Do owners figure the thieves break in first and then look for the radio? And if you put up a sign warning of an empty hole, they won't break in, is that the idea? So that's the way you save your stereo: you post a sign that says you don't have one. Come on, you can't con a crook.

The next "No Radio" sign I saw was on a Peugeot. I walked over to it, expecting to peer in and see the familiar knobs and buttons in the middle of the dash. Nothing was there but a raw hole, spewing wires.

It all reminds me of the Italy I heard about in my adolescence from returning vacationers. They spoke of the wonderful-

ly advanced civilization that had taken root on that soil centuries ago and the marvelous architecture and paintings that it had created. But you had to be careful. Don't drink the water or park your car.

New York is not that advanced. You can still drink the water. But if you're coming to visit, well, I used to advise parking in New Jersey. Now I say western New Jersey. A guy I know stopped at a diner on Route 17 somewhere between Ramsey and Ramapo. While he was noshing, the perps gained entrance to his vehicle (a Saab) by throwing a Holley four-barrel through the passenger-side window. After a closer look, they decided his radio wasn't worth the trouble, and satisfied themselves instead with the Escort he had hidden under the front seat.

It used to be, if you had a decent car—thieves prefer Mercedes, BMWs, Cadillacs, Corvettes, Jaguars, Saabs, Volvos, and the like—checking into long-term parking at Newark airport was like taking a number for the chop shop. Airport parking and a lot of other necessities around this city are handled by a joint New York-New Jersey venture called the Port Authority, which has its own police force. The superintendent is Henry DeGeneste. I called him to see if things had changed, and he told me the measures they're taking. They have regular patrols. They investigate every alarm that goes off. If they see a vehicle driving around, looking as if it's scouting the take instead of a parking place, they approach it.

"But in a lot with 5000 cars," he says, "you can't see everything. I'd caution anyone with an expensive car—whether they're going to the airport or a stadium or a shopping center—that they attract individuals who want to break in." Thieves know that expensive cars tend to have expensive stuff inside. They have stereos that are worth good money on the street.

"We don't get many hubcap reports anymore," DeGeneste goes on. "Cars don't have hubcaps. Now they have alloy wheels. And they're too much trouble to take. You need a haul-away vehicle. Stereos you can take out in a shopping bag or a suitcase. Nothing suspicious about that."

Who are the perps? "Mostly youngsters. You catch a juvenile, he's charged with juvenile delinquency, and he's back out doing business, probably in a day or so. Some of them are free-lancers who sell on the street. Some of them are entrepreneurs who steal to order."

While not absolving airport parking lots, DeGeneste figures any place with a choice selection of cars can be trouble. If irony would help his point, just a few nights be-

fore, he parked his Dodge Aries on Columbus Avenue in Manhattan and went into a restaurant. Somebody tried for the telephone on the console. In Manhattan they usually smash a window, probably because it's quicker, but this must have been a slim-jim job down between the glass and the door. He came back to find the alarm wailing. It was connected to the phone itself, and it also rings down at headquarters. The lifters obviously didn't know whose car they were hitting, but they were wary enough to leave without the phone.

As a general rule, Detroit cars don't get hit much for stereos. The units tend to be big and oddly shaped. Europe's advanced civilization, on the other hand, has produced the universal DIN-specification mounting. Thieves love these small units, held in with only two clips: *bash! pry!* and they're gone. "Takes ten seconds," DeGeneste says. And one size fits all, so the marketing is easy.

I keep wondering what happens to all of these stereos. The N.Y.C. police have an Organized Crime Control Bureau, and it has an Auto Crime Division, and it has Captain Gilmartin, who says, "Some are sold on the street to individuals who can't afford new ones. Some are sold through repair shops to the same people they were stolen from in the first place. Because these people have to replace those items."

Gilmartin and DeGeneste both express the same frustrations. Gilmartin says, "Once an individual gets items out of the car and away from the scene, a police officer can stop the individual and question him regarding those items, but he has no means of connecting them to the car. We've grabbed guys with ten or fifteen Cadillac bumpers. They all look alike. We can't do anything. Can't prove they're stolen. We know it, but we can't prove it. We're in the business of going before a judge and having to prove that an individual violated the law. The individual doesn't have to prove that he didn't."

Unlike bumpers, stereos have serial numbers, and the numbers make each one different, and therefore traceable. But Catch-22: nobody knows the serial number of his stereo. DeGeneste says they've confiscated as many as 200 car stereos in a single sting operation and can't prove any of them are stolen because they can't trace even one back to an owner.

Carmakers are responding in their own ways. For 1986, all Mercedes-Benz radios will have what press officer A.B. Shuman calls the "self-lobotomy" feature. If they're removed without certain precautions, the electronics inside are scrambled and will never work again. I ask if he thinks the thieves read the M-B tech bulletins and therefore will know not to take the radios. Shuman reminds me that thieves have their own civilization, and it's very advanced. The lifter sells something; if it doesn't work, the fence comes back to explain his dissatisfaction by hand. ●