

# Marketing

## **Black and Bleu: Labatt refuses to bend in the face of allegations that its Montreal jazz fest posters are racist**

August 13, 2001

So much for jazz festivals being mellow events. This year's jazz festival in Montreal was not only beset by heavy rain showers, but began on a wrong note when one of its major sponsors, Labatt Brewery, was accused of racism.

The Black Coalition of Quebec expressed outrage about an image used on a placard, poster and in pamphlets, advertising Labatt Bleu's sponsorship of a series of tropical music shows during the Festival International de Jazz de Montreal. The caricature depicted a black man in African garb playing two Labatt Bleu bottles as if they were bongos and contained the wording "100% jazz."

Nothing wrong with that, except that the lips on the black man were thick and exaggerated, arguably in stereotypical fashion, and it is this aspect of the drawing that had some members of the black community so upset. Dan Philip, president of the Coalition, used terms like "potato head" to describe the caricature, called Labatt insensitive and irresponsible, and said the ad was racist, obscene, degrading and humiliating.

Philip even went so far as to equate the drawing with the mindless and now infamous comment by Toronto mayor Mel Lastman about his fears of a trip to Africa, in support of Toronto's Olympics bid: "I see myself in a pot of boiling water with all these natives dancing around me." And he demanded an apology from Labatt and removal of the ad.

But while a spokesperson initially expressed regret, Labatt refused to apologize. Instead, Labatt said it was unfortunate that some people had so badly interpreted its promotional material. The ad was not created with malicious intent, but was instead in good taste and did the job of conveying the festival's spirit, stated its vice-president, public affairs Paul Wilson.

Labatt also pointed out that another ad, this time of a white man, was also done in exaggerated fashion. The caricature showed a white man with distorted chin, long nose and big ears playing a bottle of Bleu as if it were a bass-violin. Get a life, Labatt appeared to be telling the black community spokesperson. Faced with Labatt's refusal to apologize, Philip threatened to organize a black community boycott of Labatt throughout the province.

Others supported Philip's view. "A witless, badly researched and artistically challenged caricature was authorized by a naive sponsor" for an "ineffective advertising campaign," wrote Dawson College art historian Lois-Eames Valliant, in a letter published in The Gazette.

In fact, there has been a simmering dispute between the Black Coalition and jazz festival organizers. Last year, Philip wrote to the jazz festival complaining that it does not get involved in the black community, and has not done its bit to hire blacks on its staff. The festival hotly disputes the charges, saying it's probably done more than any other event in Quebec to promote black culture.

The dispute points out some of the difficulties advertisers can face in a market that has taken political correctness to the nth degree. Last year, 30% of the complaints to Advertising Standards Canada

about allegedly inappropriate ads came from Quebec, well in excess of its 24% share of Canada's population.

Creatives often cite this situation as one of the reasons why much of the province's ads are mediocre at best. However, since political correctness and complaints about ads are not exactly unique to Quebec, creatives are overplaying this excuse.

The jazzfest ads were created by BBDO Montreal. Aside from agreeing with Labatt's position that the images of both the white and black man exaggerated their features, Raymond Boucher, chair and CEO of BBDO Montreal, declined to comment on the affair.

After being a sponsor of the festival for the majority of the event's 22-year history, Labatt signed on this year for another five years at about \$1 million annually. Aside from sponsoring the Les Tropiques Bleue Legere series, Labatt sponsored such daily series as Les Soirees Labatt Blues, Les Spectacles Labatt Blues and Les Nuits Bleue Dry this year.

Fortunately, after the festival's July 8 end, the tone had softened. Philip met with reporters and told them that after a Black Coalition meeting with Labatt's Wilson, the threat of a boycott had been removed. "We concluded that this Labatt caricature emanated more from a lack of knowledge about the black community than from intentional malice."

For its part, Labatt has promised to contact the Coalition in the future, if it ever has questions about promotions that include a black person. So it seems that next year, Labatt and the black community will be drumming from the same tune at the festival. Now if only they could do something about the weather.