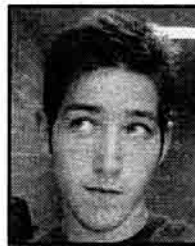


My Car Pulls Apart

by Chris Ladd
A&E EDITOR

It was perfect. It was shiny and new. It came in a cardboard box wrapped in Chinese newspaper and a bag that warned me not to wrap my two-year old in it. My brand-new CD player



WHERE THE
HELL IS
WAYNE, ME?

was here. I'd grown tired of listening to cassette tapes like it was 1982. It was time for the power to skip tracks, or power to swerve from the path of a Mack truck holding the Joni Mitchell album you'd been searching for behind the empty nacho container under the back seat. But this was not any CD player. This was the Pioneer-DEH 7400. The Pioneer-DEH 7400 is more than a CD player, this magnificent piece of machinery plays mp3's, up to ten hours of them at a time. Or, I should say, it could before I got through with it. It was the kind of appliance you might have seen advertised as the future in 1956, next to flying bubble cars and those sweet robot maids like on the Jetsons. It was practically science fiction, and I broke it. I cut that haughty stereo down to size, I did.

The trouble all began in June, when I ordered the damn thing from my home in Wayne, Maine. After a year of ordering every conceivable convenience here at Skidmore, I'd grown pretty comfortable with the routine, and I'd even memorized my credit card number. It's four. I order things online I don't need, things I don't want, and on occasion things that cause harmful diseases like cholera. I'm aware of how to fill in the forms, where I live, and where I want things shipped.

Which is why I was so surprised when my brand-new CD player arrived precisely on time and in perfect working order three states too West. (that's "three states too left" for map people) Luckily, the store in Oregon where I ordered from was more than helpful.

"Oh, I see, you want send to New York," came the voice on the other end of the line in broken English. He obviously wasn't a native speaker; must've been from Oregon or something.

"No, I wanted it sent to Maine. I live there."

"Oh, so why you not sent to New York?"

"You addressed my package wrong. You sent it to Saratoga Springs, New York, and I told you to send it to Maine," I explained. "I even called to make sure you would send it to the right place."

"Oh, where you want send it?"

"I want it here in Maine."

"You live in Maine?"

"Yes."

"Well Maine must be right next to New York, I think, you maybe go and get it?" he said. Again, I chose to excuse his poor knowledge of geography as he seemed new to our country; heaven knows the Oregonian people have seen enough trouble without me hassling them about Maine's location among the 48 contiguous states.

The man gave me a number that would in turn connect me to a UPS representative who could help me, but I thought it much more convenient to wait two-and-a-half months for my purchase than dial an 11-digit number and talk to the UPS employees that didn't pass the driving test. Heartbroken, they probably mope around in a stolen pair of brown shorts from the UPS locker room, wandering aimlessly from the kitchen to the living room, dreaming of brown paper packages tied up with string, and playing taxi games on PlayStation because it's "close enough." No, they've been through plenty, already, I decided I could wait it out.

And that's exactly what I did. A yellow slip adorned with a bar code in my shiny new mailbox alerted me that the package had in fact arrived here on campus with plenty of time to spare; I had specified "special two day delivery" two-and-a-half months ago. The small stereo came in a box large enough for a rhinoceros filled with Korean newspaper. The box was filled, not the rhinoceros. My days of

analog were over. It was time to send ripples from the pavement beneath my car. It was time to wake neighbors in Portugal. It was time to crank it.

I bought the requisite "wiring harness" for my stereo at a local car stereo shop, and told the man behind the counter in a very "I know what I'm doing, I've done this a thousand times before" sort of way, that I had no idea what I was doing, had never

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done this before, and how do I start doing it? He told me.

He told me that the first thing I needed to do was remove the dash.

"And how would I go about doing that?" I asked.

"Well, this here car's got 'pressure clips.'"

"And that means..."

"It means you have to pull the dash away from the console."

"You mean..."

"You yank it."

"Excuse me?"

"You just give it a good hard tug, and it should come loose. Good luck!"

First of all, I love doing these little "projects." I like building things, I enjoy taking them apart, and I certainly take pleasure in a job well done. That said, I don't grasp the logic in this dash thing. I want a scientific micro-screw adjusted, hyper-calibrated, hydraulically aligned dash taker-off-er. I want a shiny silver button beneath the heater duct to press and make the stereo spit out with an electronic "whir" while a cybernetic voice politely instructs me to "please insert new stereo unit... now." In the eighty-odd years since cars became "popular," one would think someone

discovered a better way to remove a dashboard than to simply "yank" on it.

Nonetheless, I gave it a shot. I drove back home with my new stereo sitting on the passenger seat beside me; I'd fastened the safety belt around its pretty little waist. My new "wiring harness" lay next to it, beautiful in its own little way. I parked in West Lot, far away from prying eyes, so that my wonderful CD player and I could share this miracle of birth together. Alone.

Parking brake on, keys out of the ignition, doors open, I gave the black plastic console a gentle tug. Nothing happened. In fact, nothing happened with a slight jerk, a substantial pull, or good yanking. It took, and I make no exaggeration here, a fine gadswalloping to unhook that first "pressure clip," all the while worried about cracking my dashboard in two. In the end, just to get to the stereo itself, I needed to loosen, remove, or alter nearly every piece of my car's interior. Mostly, I was frightened by the amount of it that simply "pulled off." For some reason, I'd always assumed socket wrenches, hex nuts, and metric systems were necessary to dismantle a machine of such expense and sophistication. Not so. Apparently, most automobiles are quite literally thrown together and snapped into place. Very unsettling. It took nearly three hours to get the requisite pieces out of the way.

I destroyed my old cassette stereo while removing it, happily prying it out with a screwdriver, paying little attention to slight bits of expensive plastic ricocheting off the walls and ceiling. Drenched in sweat and shaking with anticipation, I stripped the enamel coating from the color coded wires with a Swiss-Army scissor and matched green to green, white to white, red to red, and black to... where does the black go? There's no black! What am I going to do, what am I... Ok, calm down, read the manual, yes, instructions are your friend... let's see, blue, orange, green, purple, black, white, gr- wait, BLACK, OK black goes to... oh, it's a ground. Not important. OK, no

big deal, no big deal. Grounds don't matter.

Finally, it was time for a test run. My beautiful stereo hanging by bare wires from its compartment, I put the key in the ignition, and switched from OFF to ACC. It lit up, it actually lit up! Ok, lets see, radio... yes! I can hear music, let's try a cd... this is great! The wonderful, amazing thing was astounding, absolutely wonderful. I could see myself rolling down the highway blasting Quiet Riot through four states. I didn't have a convertible, but with my newfound knowledge of car accessories, I was sure the top of my sedan would pop right off; it probably had pressure clips.

I thought I'd better tape off the wire connections, but I hadn't any electrical tape. I set off to find some. I looked all over campus, and there was none to be found. I couldn't drive anywhere; the snap-off sections of my car needed to be re-snapped and my stereo still hung from its unsightly hole in the dash. Taping off those bare copper connections isn't that important, I reasoned. I'll just put it in and see how it goes.

There were sparks. There was a loud pop. There is no more Pioneer DEH-7400. Driving a car with no stereo at all is a Zen-like experience. It's gone now, and the wires and antenna jack snake from the empty crevasse. I've been doing a lot of thinking between periodically reaching down to change the station on the hole in my dashboard. My lights don't work, and the car has a funny smell all the time. The snap off parts didn't snap on as well as they pulled apart, so they rattle and buzz while I drive. In short, I broke my car. I've made an appointment at the car audio place that sold me the ill-fated wire harness, and next week I'll walk in humbly and tell them what happened. They'll probably say it can happen to anyone and that I caught a tough break and then, just as I'm leaving, make a crude remark behind my back about pressure clips. ①