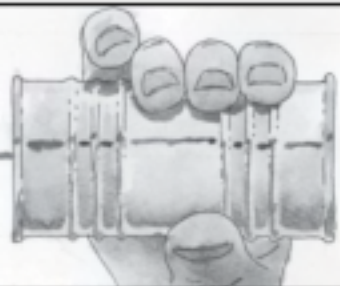


MEMBER 2 MEMBER



Member solutions to member problems.

ISSUE 108 FOLLOW-UP: JOHN MARTIN'S '34 FORD COUPE

Back in Issue 107, the TDR's Stan Gozzi did a write-up on a seminar that he attended at the SEMA show that featured several of the custom car builders. Next, in Issue 108, the TDR's John Martin gave us some further insight into the custom car world with a look at his '34 Ford Coupe. As an introduction to John's article I noted, "Certainly we all want to know more about the tricks-of-the-trade and how we stack up to all of those done-in-an-hour television personalities. There is only one of the staff that's had the opportunity to play in that league: John Martin."

A Beautiful Car

John shared with us some pictures of his car and noted that it took "8 years and all of his lunch money" to build the Ford Coupe.

I'm not bashful to ask a question, "John, how much did you spend on the Ford Coupe?" His answer, "Again, the project took eight years. So, over that time it was exactly \$18,500 per year (that's a total of \$148k). In the end, I guess I could have purchased eight econo-box, used cars instead of the '34 Ford Coupe, but what fun would that have been?"



John's '34 Coupe.

Obviously, that price number does not include John's "free" labor. So, when you look back at Stan's article, you realize the price tags for turn-key cars that were mentioned by custom car builder Tim Strange at the SEMA seminar, "200K to seven figures, with most between \$250,000-\$350,000," you can see that John was/is playing in the big league.



John's '34 Coupe.

Hey, I'm not surprised at the cost of a restoration or custom car build. I've owned a restoration project for over 30 years, a 1974 BMW 3.0CS. (It hurts to say that.) So, like John, I totaled-up all of my receipts. The cost of ownership, per year, is \$1500. Not bad. Wait, I'm 45K into the project and it still doesn't run/drive? Don't tell the wife. And, the 45K doesn't include my "free" labor.



The Editor's 1974 BMW 3.0CS.

Intrigued by the glitz and glamour of SEMA, numerous automobile auctions on television, stories from old and new Hot Rod magazines and the cars of the television celebrities, I asked John to tell the audience what it is like to "run with the big dogs."

John sends us the following report, "How Money Has Changed Hot Rodding."

HOW MONEY HAS CHANGED HOT RODDING

by John Martin

Background

Modifying cars (hot rodding) to increase their performance or improve their appearance really gained traction after World War II when returning military couldn't get sufficient excitement out of their routine daily jobs. Early issues of Hot Rod magazine (I have issues from 1949 forward) spread this hobby from southern California across the United States.

I know Robert is more attuned to sports cars than drag cars, so let me add here that hot rodding covered all areas of performance, including drag racing, land speed racing (Bonneville, Muroc), and sports car racing. In fact, Max Balchowsky (Road & Track – August 2016) had a Buick-powered home-made special, which regularly embarrassed exotic European machines. Lance Reventlow and his early Scarabs were also road race winning hot rods.

When I began reading Hot Rod, my young mind went berserk. I couldn't wait to get my first car (a 1951 Mercury) when I was 15 so I could begin modifying it. I even got a job at Wright's garage so I could learn about auto mechanics from pros. I was heavily influenced by custom cars and drag racing.

In the early days, there wasn't much of an automotive aftermarket, so if you wanted something different for your car, you had to scour the bone yards or fabricate it yourself. You would get together with your buddies, hash out some ideas, and begin working on your car. Hot Rod, Car Craft (originally called Honk!), and Rod and Custom helped immensely with their "how to" articles. Car clubs also got you access to more minds and thoughts.

When I finished with that 1951 Merc, it was Caddy-powered with a '37 La Salle transmission and mildly customized. It was the fastest car around until the small block Chevy hit the streets about 1957 or 1958. But, when I took the Merc to the drags, it wasn't competitive because it was so heavy (4150 pounds), and the Caddy didn't breathe as well as the small block Chevy.

Drag Racing

In the early '60s auto manufacturers entered racing with improved engine designs, better drivelines, and lighter vehicles. I traded my Merc for a 1962 Chevy 409, four-speed with dual quads (like in the Beach Boys song). My Cadillac engines with multiple carbs couldn't make nearly the horsepower that the 409 did, and the '62 Chevy was about 300 pounds lighter than the '51 Merc.

In the early '60s it seemed like everyone went drag racing at the track with their buddies. Drag racing was very grassroots, so if you were going to win, you had to do all your own engine building and fabrication. By the mid-'60s drag racing (and the aftermarket industry) exploded. Instead of only three or four camshaft regrinders, there were now a dozen. If you wanted to remain competitive you had to try them all (we didn't know much about cam design and specifications), but grassroots guys didn't have that kind of money.



I know it is a fuzzy photograph, but here is our '67 Chevy II funny car, "The High and Mighty."

Then the big money guys invaded using professional engine builders and sponsor dollars. Drag racing finally got out of reach of us hobbyists in 1969 when Tom McEwen signed a million dollar deal for himself and Don Prudhome with Mattel toys. Don Schumacher used daddy's money (and Caddy tow car) to go racing. Our money came from only winnings, plus \$535 per month from Boemler Chevrolet. Jim Kirby was a mechanic and I was a budding engineer at Shell Research. Mike Kausch was an electrician. We had to find someplace else to play.



We were running this Camaro when the "cost of admission to race" exceeded our modest budget.

That point was really driven home one Monday morning when I had a breakfast meeting for work with a fellow at a four-star hotel. While I was waiting for him to arrive, I saw Kenny Bernstein (Budweiser King funny car) come out of the front entrance in a nice jogging suit for a little run. We couldn't even consider staying in such a nice place, especially after the races were over. We usually slept in a sleeper we had built for the truck. Time to go elsewhere.

Car Shows, Anyone?

The car show circuit was still pretty grass roots, so I headed there. This was a great move because you could win awards with a car you had built with limited funds. You had professional builders (Barris, etc.) building machines for rich guys, and Hollywood movies, but there weren't very many of those types of cars around in the Midwest.

However, it didn't take long before the indoor car shows got so competitive that the judges began taking the easy way out. Instead of judging the number of modifications, creativity, or innovation, they began to examine cars for faults or mistakes. Contenders for prestigious awards like the Ridler at the Detroit Autorama had to be beautiful, plus they had to have zero flaws.

Here is an example: all screw head slots in a piece must be lined up in the same direction. Cars are wheeled into the area with tires that are either wrapped in plastic or they put the "show-tires" and wheels on the car after it was in the display. I was beaten once by a '57 Chevy which had only four miles on the odometer from being moved to and from the trailer. It had a chrome driveshaft and leather upholstery replacing the floor carpet and trunk liner. Really, leather on the floor, now that's practical.



At the 2018 Amelia Island Concours event this 1976 Porsche 935, owned by Jerry Seinfeld, was on display. Absolutely beautiful.



The bodywork and stainless/mesh vent covers were works of art. Really, absolutely beautiful. The AI event isn't the same as a Ridler or NSRA show, and it is okay that flat head screws on the vent cover aren't aligned. Hey, it is a race car.

Once again the big money and professional shops had taken over the sport. It is very difficult to examine 100 cars and compare all their flaws. It's much easier to give the big awards to professional builders who show organizers know will always display quality cars and advertise in their publications. So giving awards became more subjective than objective. The only iron-clad objective rule I noticed was that the car had to start and run under its own power. This was a reaction to the many show vehicles which were displayed in the '60s even though they weren't operable.

With subjectivity also comes celebrity. I was at the Detroit Autorama in 2006 when Joe Gibbs' wife's car won a "Great 8." Joe is a very nice person and was coach of the Washington Redskins and the owner of Joe Gibbs Racing. The Great 8 are the finalists for the Ridler award. The car was very nice, but it wasn't a contender. So Joe got a Great 8 over some more deserving cars merely because of his celebrity.

When the National Street Rod Association (NSRA) and the Goodguys association began promoting outdoor car shows, they made it a point to judge only cars built by professional builders. Other cars were "picked," not judged, because they had features which impressed the officials. The atmosphere was much more relaxed, and the emphasis was more on social activities. Both organizations were immediate hits. At one time the NSRA had over 14,000 cars at their Nationals.

Celebrity Builders

However, the professional builders, many who had TV shows (Boyd Coddington, Chip Foose, etc.), convinced rich guys to have them build cars for the outdoor shows. It began to get ridiculous again. I was beaten by a car which was beautiful (and it was featured in a magazine) but it had no top. No top whatsoever! I was beaten out at another meet by a car which cost 1.2 million dollars to build, but it would overheat after traveling just a few hundred yards. My favorite was a car which was deemed better than mine in the "Hot Rod of the Year Competition." The car was transported all the way from California to Nashville. When it came time for the road tour portion, the owner couldn't close his own hood. He had to call the builder over to do it. I'd say that the trophy he took home had an expensive price tag.

The new "picks" are usually made to keep celebrity builders, who advertise with the associations, happy. Both associations are really thankful for their advertising dollars. Don't misunderstand, these cars have superb fit and finish. They are painted monochromatic colors so they can be repainted and buffed endless times. Door and hood gaps are perfect (see TDR 108) and innovation is often seen in appearance items. One of my competitors spent \$20,000 on four, CNC machined, billet wheels. They were beautiful, but \$20K for wheels—not me! I can't afford it.

*They were beautiful,
but \$20K for wheels—not me!
I can't afford it.*

So, as a generalization, the big money guys with no mechanical skills and professional builders have relegated old John to the sidelines. Don't get me wrong: I'm not complaining, I've had a great ride! I've had my cars featured in about a dozen magazines (including one from Canada and one from Australia), as well as the Goodguys website. One car was on both Car Crazy and My Classic Car. I've received five Goodguys Picks, and most people are happy to get just one. Thank you very much, everyone.

But the very thing that piqued my interest in hot rodding originally, grass roots creativity and innovation, is being pushed aside. I hate to see that innovative spirit die. Only rat rodders and Pro Mod drag racers are now innovators, and I can't do either. I don't like unfinished cars, and I'm not about to piss away the "family fortune" racing again. I'll just continue to go to the drags and car shows as an interested spectator. It's now up to you TDR readers to carry the banner for the grassroots builder: you're the only ones left! And pickup trucks are hot right now!

John Martin
TDR Writer

So, there you have it, a look behind the scenes at the bigger, media event type car shows. And, to think back one short year ago we had our very own Turbo Diesel truck show at Cummins. No fanfare, no awards: just a great gathering of TDR members exchanging ideas and observing the creativity and craftsmanship of other owners. Thanks, Members.

Here are some photos from last year.

