

BORN AGAIN CLASSICS



Kiwi car-making craftsmanship By Donn Anderson

New Zealanders have long shown great propensity for designing and making cars or building look-alike replicas of expensive overseas sporty models. The craft developed from a desire to be able to drive something a little different in a land where obtaining exotic motor vehicles was once difficult and costly.

In today's changed market where there is more freedom of choice than ever before, the same scarcity situation does not exist when it comes to buying sports cars. But the cost factor remains, so the small car cottage industry continues with as much enthusiasm as ever.

Making, modifying and rebuilding cars has been part of the Kiwi heritage since first autocars took to our dusty roads around the turn of the century. New Zealand's isolation and import restrictions often meant a chap had to make a part locally or go without.

Little surprise that a tiny car-building industry was born, and that some superb creations were to develop. Twenty years ago Aucklander Ferris de Joux took a Ferrari Grand Prix racing car that had seen

much competition, and used the Italian vehicle as a basis for a fibreglass bodied two-door closed sports car, powered by a Jaguar engine.

De Joux cleverly created a handsome high performance car, using some parts from production family cars of the early sixties. The bumpers and tail-lights, for example, were sourced from the Austin A40 Farina. But most of the car was the result of Kiwi ingenuity, a talent that persists today.

The New Zealand reputation was further enhanced when the late Bruce McLaren designed and built a race-winning sports car which was a success in North America and Britain, and then produced a Grand Prix formula 1 machine that was world competitive.

In the fifties, when low-cost sports cars were extremely thin on the New Zealand ground, Arthur Harris and Bucklers New Zealand produced a budget open car in Auckland. Not only was it available, but it was affordable.

Today's local "kit car" motor industry is going better than ever, with ingenious vehicles appearing in both North and South Islands. The industry is not large or even prosperous, but it does show a lot of talent and potential. There's no

doubt, either, that the standard of workmanship in many cases remains quite outstanding in an age when quality is sometimes difficult to find.

In Upper Hutt, for example Alex McDonald and Graham Berry of Almac Cars have built 20 replicas of the classic Anglo-American AC Shelby Cobra V8 sports car. And you need to look long and hard to distinguish this machine from the real thing.

In Europe it can cost more than \$50,000 for a used example of the Cobra which actually ended production in 1967. Almac, however, can offer one of their replicas for around \$25,000, even if you will have to do some of the finishing yourself. Sales taxes boost the price of fully completed cars, so it is more logical and certainly less expensive to buy the bits and put them together yourself.

There is no doubt, however, that not everyone has the talent, or the inclination to get their hands dirty. So Almac is finding many customers prefer to pay the extra and buy a completed vehicle. The Lower Hutt replica is an accurate copy of one of the world's classic cars, right down to the lusty V8 engine lurking up front under the bonnet.

This masculine sports car has a fibreglass body and sits on a solid chassis which uses the parallel ladder configuration. It is jig built and MIG



Rotorua enthusiast Ross Baker with two cars he has built, the Heron (left) and a replica of the Ford GT sports Car.

welded, with steel subframes supporting the door hinges, steering column, dashboard and screen pillars. All the frames are bonded to the body and bolted directly to the chassis frame.

Of course the car does not follow the old original Cobra in every detail. Front suspension can be chosen from Jaguar E-type, Jaguar S-type or XJ6. Even if existing parts do not fit, they can often be modified to do the job. In the case of the XJ6 parts, the driveshafts need shortening.

The Kiwi Cobra uses Holden HQ disc brakes, while the Lower Hutt company can offer either Ford or General Motors V8 engines. Customers also have a choice of transmissions, and about half of them opt for an automatic. Most of the parts are already in the country, and the buyer has the choice of new or reconditioned used bits.

Little of the vehicle is imported, but there are exceptions such as the windscreen which comes from the UK. The carefully made AC centre wheelcaps are made locally and, of course, the one-piece moulded body

is entirely crafted in Upper Hutt.

End result is a 1089 kg machine, with comfortable interior, lusty performance and a surprisingly gentle ride. This last mentioned quality is a reflection of the Jaguar suspension, but is also testament to the fine workmanship and general high quality of the car. No rattles or shakes in this machine; the Cobra replica feels and drives as well as the doors open and shut.

Alex McDonald has also found there is a market for a low-cost MG-style sports car of the fifties era—and Almac is not the only New Zealand company going into the business of offering budget copies of those delectable post-war British sporties. Almac's TC-style baby has a fibreglass body like the Cobra, and can be fitted to an unmodified Triumph Herald chassis, or an Upper Hutt chassis which incorporates Vauxhall Viva suspension.

By the time you get together the windscreen, frame, body and engine, it should be possible to put an Almac MG-copy sports car on the road for around \$7000. While the car

doesn't look exactly like an MG TF, McDonald believes the overall effect is the right one. Since there are plenty of ageing Triumph Heralds still operating in New Zealand, Almac has no worries about the supply of appropriate parts. Not only does the car use the Herald chassis, but Triumph engine, gearbox, propshaft, front and rear suspension, handbrake, instruments and wiring. In Rotorua Ross Baker has built several of his Lotus Esprit-inspired fibreglass closed sports cars. But the Heron, as this car is known, is in no way a replica of the Lotus, despite the styling similarities. The Rotorua car differs from the Lotus in having a glass body without a separate steel chassis or steel subframe, and is shorter than the UK car.

The only steel part of the main body structure is a roll-bar to which seat belt and door catches are attached. Body sills are foam-filled to give a 30 percent increase in strength and act as sound-deadening, while the rear and side window frames are aluminium extrusions. The Heron has a solid fibreglass backbone, and a special design



The Upper Hutt-built Almac Cars AC Cobra replica faithfully follows the classic lines of the original model which has now become an expensive classic

involving the attachment of components to the body/chassis.

This Rotorua GT uses many parts, including transmission, steering brakes and suspension parts from the Czechoslovakian Skoda. Yet another example of Kiwi ingenuity. Engines are 1.6 litre twin camshaft Fiats, and the Skoda suspension is fully independent. Ross Baker says 90 percent of his Heron MJ1 car is New Zealand made or sourced since most of the Skoda or Fiat parts are recycled components.

Tom Morland is using his Christchurch-based company to produce replicas of the classic 1979-81 series Pontiac TransAm. These clever two-door saloons are only part of the Morland replica range that also includes an Italian de Tomaso Pantera and Corvette. Tom converts Holden floorplans into TransAms, buying up HQ wrecks that eventually emerge as North American GM muscle cars. The Kiwi Pontiac can also be adapted to the HJ, HZ and HZ series Holdens.

The Christchurch replicas are usually sold in kit form, with the package including inner door frames, headlight and tail-light panels, front

inner guards, bonnet and window surrounds. Door hinges, handles, latches, bonnet hinges and catches are all 'stolen' from Holdens, while the headlights are by Toyota. One of the few original Pontiac parts is the window glass.

Producing the TransAm replica is not simply a matter of taking the Holden basis and adapting the local body. The Holden floorplan has to be shorted 51mm to conform to the 2807mm wheelbase of the real TransAm, and the firewall is moved back to allow correct positioning of the engine. In addition, the top face of the Holden firewall is lowered about an inch to allow the Pontiac-style fascia top to be fitted.

The car has excellent rigidity, with a steel section glassed into the rear roof, running from the back door latchpost and Holden trunk pan. Many types of engines can be fitted to the Morland Pontiac, with the most popular choice being an American GM V8 or the Australian Leyland P76 V8 alloy unit.

Suspension, brakes, power steering and electric window mechanisms are all Holden parts. The finished product is the spitting image of the TransAm, and weighs about 200 kg less than the

original. This is no flash in the pan exercise for Tom — he has built 23 of these vehicles over a three year period.

Morland's other exercises are a de Tomaso Pantera sports car and a 1976 Corvette, both replicas in the same TransAm mould, but quite different vehicles in appearance and construction. The Pantera has a full spaceframe and body moulded from an original. The hand-built chassis is constructed in jigs for accuracy, and the body includes a strong roll cage. Like the Pontiac, the Pantera uses many GM Holden components, including brakes and stub axles, while the engine is a Leyland P76 and the gearbox is by Volkswagen.

There are many other New Zealanders busy building cars. Men like Aucklander Cliff Everson who has created a stylish European two-door GT with steel chassis and hand-rolled aluminium body. The EMW6 (EMW for Everson Motor Works) has a 6-litre GM V8 engine and 5-speed West German transmission but it is the superbly finished body and the handsome design that really captures attention. Small the New Zealand car-building industry may be, but it is certainly diverse and full of surprises. □