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CARS

# CARS

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## Who Really Builds Detroit's Musclecars?

Inside Motor City's busiest customizer

### High Performance Styling

New monthly series begins with AMC

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### Chevy's New Z/28

Could be the best Camaro yet



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Installing headers the right way







# COSMETICS INCORPORATED

The image makers at Motortown know  
that a little makeup can go a long way toward the  
design (and sales) of today's "musclecars"

by  
Gary Witzenburg

**T**he gawkers on Woodward Avenue couldn't believe their squinty little eyes. They blinked and gaped, their lower jaws hanging down around their jean pockets. Some swallowed their gum or bit the filters off their Marlboro Lights in disbelief.

For there, ambling up the boulevard in no particular hurry, all decked out in mean-looking spoilers and louvers and fat, pop-riveted flares, resplendent in Plymouth racing blue-on-blue, with enormous Goodyear tires on businesslike deep-dish competition-style wheels, plying the asphalt proudly like a hungry jungle cat, was the *baddest* street racer they'd ever seen. It even had big Richard Petty "43's" screaming defiantly from each door. All up and

down the Avenue Chevis cowered, Trans Ams trembled and mighty Mopars melted away behind the nearest Taco Bell.

But wait. There was no roll bar in the thing, no three-inch sewer pipes down its sides, and Uncle's original five mph bumpers still decorated its body front and rear.

So what the hell was it, anyway? It *looked* almost like a real honest-to-god circle-track racer—but it sure didn't sound like one.

In fact it was Chrysler's latest "image car," a pseudo-racer Plymouth Volare decked out like the famous kit cars that battle the short-track wars every weekend near your town and mine. It's also available as a Dodge Aspen in two-tone red. It represents one more in a long succession of specialty-car projects by the Troy, Michi-

gan company called Motortown. This outfit also builds Super Pak versions of Plymouth's Volare Road Runner and Dodge's Aspen R/T for Chrysler, not to mention the luxury Dodge Midnight Charger.

Now I suppose you thought that today's generation of muscular-looking image machines grew all that extra fiberglass right on your favorite manufacturer's assembly lines. Wrong-O, Sunday Driver! It would bog down the old assembly line too much to screw together a few hundred of these special versions and a couple thousand of those on the side. So the companies usually farm out such projects, and Motortown gets by far the lion's share of them due to its experience and reputa-





*No, that's not Richard Petty's blue Plymouth stocker. It's Motortown's Volare that looks like Richard Petty's stocker. Also available as a red Dodge Aspen.*

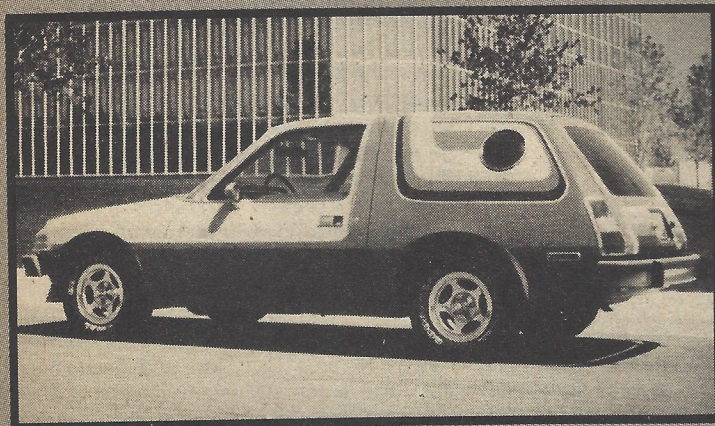
tion in the field.

Standard procedure calls for Motortown's designers to grind out lovely concept sketches, usually based on the brainstormings of marketing V-P Jim Wangers (you'll remember him, perhaps, as the father of the original GTO when he was working for Pontiac's ad agency back in 1964). The sketches are then presented for consideration to the various carmakers.

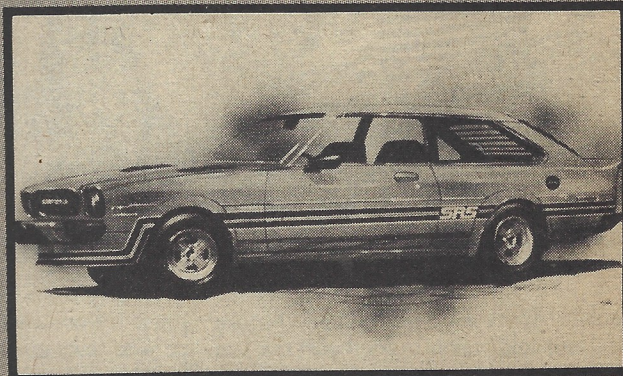
Once the decision has been made to build a special car, a small facility is set up near the automaker's assembly plant where completed cars are dropped off and modified, then delivered back to the plant for shipment to dealers. The process costs the manufacturer nothing, since the dealers pick up the special-package tab. The dealers turn a profit on the special package just as they do with stereos, air conditioning

and other optional equipment.

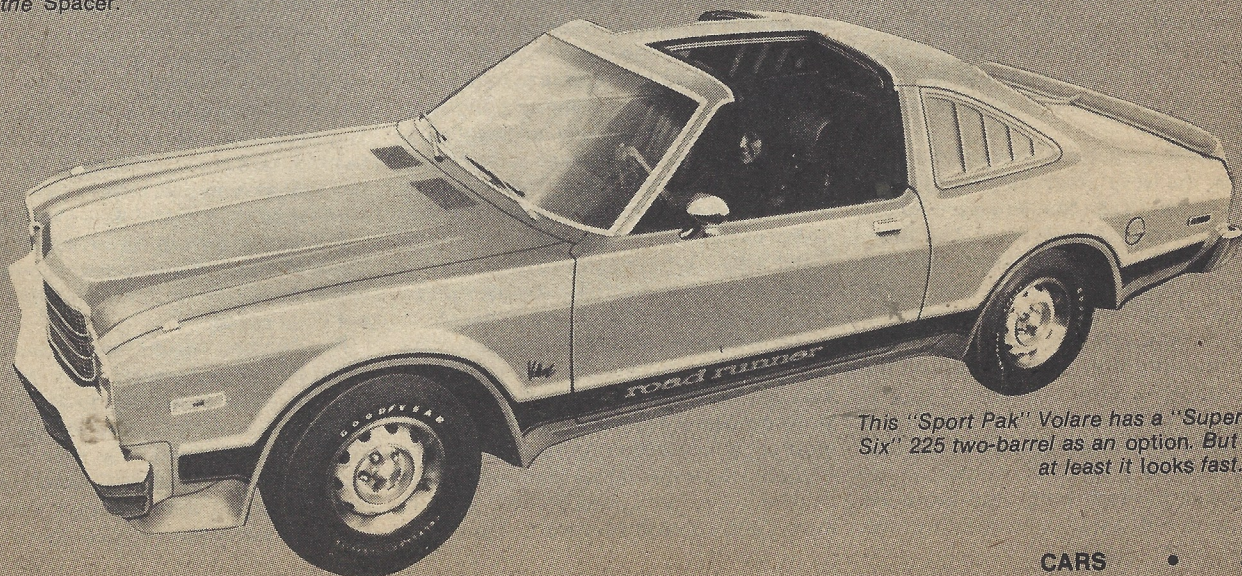
The list of '77-model specialty cars created and built by Motortown in this way includes the aforementioned Road Runner and R/T Super Paks, the Midnight Charger, Pontiac's LeMans Can Am, AMC Hornet AMX and GMC's Sarge, Gypsy Traveler and Indy Pace Truck van and light truck offerings. The company also stays busy manufacturing trick pieces for a whole raft of



*The Pacer based mini-wagon prototype is appropriately named the "Spacer."*



*"The car of the future" from Toyota, with help from Motortown's designers. These futuristic Toyotas are not widely available throughout the country.*



*This "Sport Pak" Volare has a "Super Six" 225 two-barrel as an option. But at least it looks fast.*





The Can Am, Motortown's idea of what a LeMans Sport Coupe should be, complete with 400-cube V8, RTS suspension with front and rear stabilizer bars and, of course, stripes and hood scoop.



Motortown and Dodge's famed limited edition Midnight Charger.

special Toyota models (called "Future Cars" and sold mainly in southeast U.S.) as well as crash and replacement parts for all its past and present products.

Founded in 1974, Motortown's first project was "Li'l Wide Track," a good-looking pseudo-muscle Pontiac Astre intended to add some post-fuel-crisis excitement to the division's little car line. Over 7,000 Li'l Wide Tracks were ultimately built and the conversion kits are still being sold for dealer installation.

Next came a couple of low-volume trick Chevis, the Nova Shark for Chicago-area dealers and the Vega Nomad wagon for the southwest and west coast areas. The latter, which brought back the classic Nomad two-door wagon styling of the mid-1950s, resulted in a 3,000-car production run and is also still available in kit form.

And then Jim Wangers sold Ford on the idea of doing a 5,000-car build of special Mustang II fastbacks in the image of the famous Shelby Cobra Mustangs of the '60s. These cars were to be decorated almost exactly like the real things had been—all white paint with bold blue stripes over the

top and from wheel to wheel on the rocker panels, also spoilers front and rear and louvers over the rear quarter windows. Wangers had the audacity to suggest calling this car the Cobra II; and Ford had the nerve to do it.

Everyone laughed when the first Cobra II rolled out the door, because everyone knew it was nothing but a cosmetic treatment and had no real muscle to back up its racy looks. But then a funny thing happened: people started buying them! Suddenly Motortown found itself working day and night to fill the dealer orders, and by the end of the '76 model year some 27,000 Cobra IIs had hit the streets.

But why? Why would anyone want a rather ordinary Mustang II decorated with a bunch of spoilers, stripes and louvers?

Jim Wangers explains it this way: "Today's younger generation has grown up with the realities of fuel shortages, emissions problems, highway safety needs and insurance limitations, and this has all triggered a tempering of their needs and desires. They still want spirited performance and visual excitement in their vehi-

cles, but they also want such practical things as quality, durability, sophistication of design and economy of operation.

"Today's image-type automobiles don't have the pavement-ripping acceleration of yesterday's muscle machines, but they are still fun to drive, they handle and stop better, and they get better gas mileage. These attributes, combined with exciting good looks, make these cars very appealing to the youth of today." Besides you can always modify them to go faster after they're in your hot little hands anyway, right?

And there's another factor at work: these so-called "youth-image" cars are not all snapped up by people under 25. Says Wangers: "The teenagers and young adults of the '50s and '60s have grown up with this great love for cars. They know they can't buy the sort of muscle they could as kids, but they can still enjoy the pleasure of owning and driving more sophisticated, more practical but equally attention-grabbing modern image-type cars. . . . These are the same guys who had Goats and Road Runners and Mach 1 Mustangs and SS 396 Chevilles not too many years ago."

One problem with this sort of business, however, is that if your product becomes too successful—if the demand for a specialty car becomes so high that the automaker *can* efficiently build it on his own assembly line—you're liable to lose the job. This happened last year when Ford decided to produce its own Mustang IIs. And again this year as American Motors has moved its surprisingly successful AMX in-house.

But Motortown is never short of new ideas, and the '78 model year should see a whole bunch more clever creations come out of its shops.

For Chrysler, Motortown will build a set of nicely restyled special R/Ts and Road Runners (now called "Sport Paks"), plus the wild "Street Kit Cars" discussed at this article's outset. There may also be a new variation on the Midnight Charger theme; a flared, scooped and spoilered version of Dodge's new Magnum specialty car; a re-





The brushed aluminum Targa style band being installed on a Hornet AMX at the Motortown facility in Wisconsin. Note the rear window hinged louvers already in place, also done by Motortown.



Why stop at cars? Motortown's influence and designs extend to the vast light truck market, as witnessed by this racy GMC Sierra pick-up—the official Indy 500 support vehicle.

surrection of the famous Chrysler 300 "Letter Cars" of the '50s and '60s (based on the Cordoba); a special two-door Diplomat or four-door LeBaron; and perhaps even something new and exciting based on the Volare/Aspen wagon.

For GM, Motortown is hoping to do a whole bunch of special Monzas, Sunbirds, Starfires and Skyhawks, and maybe a performance-oriented package to hype sales of Chevy's Chevette mini-car.

AMC will debut a Motortown-designed and built luxury Pacer hatchback called Crown Pacer, some nice, low-priced sun-

roof packages for Gremlin, and perhaps even a Pacer Wagon-based mini-van called Spacer, the prototype of which was recently displayed at Detroit's *Automotive News* World Congress.

And there are some import-car projects in the works as well, in addition to the continuing Toyota "Future Car" job. The first is a sexy restyling of Datsun's 200-SX sporty car (as yet unnamed) that should have been unveiled by the time you read this. The second will be a mean-looking dress-up package for Saab's soon-to-debut Turbo EMS; and those may be followed by a special VW

Dasher in the spring and perhaps a dolled-up sport version of Volvo's 265 wagon.

So the next time you see what looks like a race car rolling down the street, or a Pacer van, or something equally bizarre, it may have been built as a one-off by some individual or custom shop—but then again it may well have been produced in larger numbers, with full Detroit approval, by Motortown or one of its smaller competitors. Stranger things have already happened—and what they'll come up with in the future is anybody's guess.