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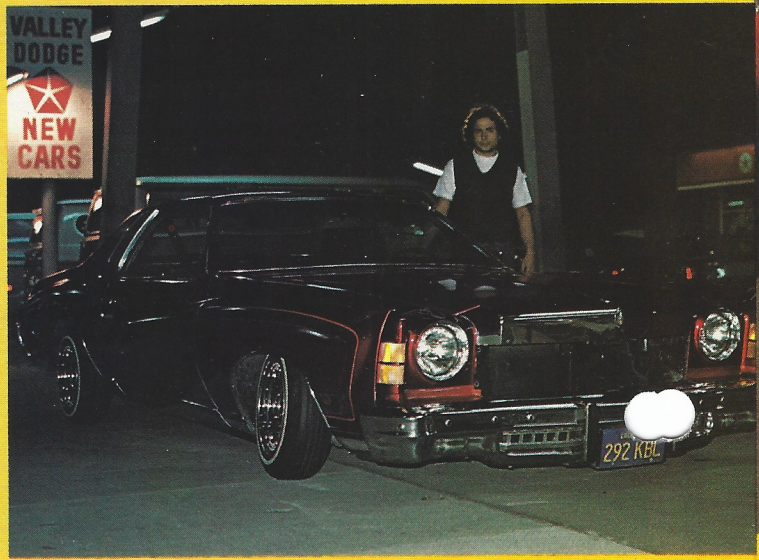
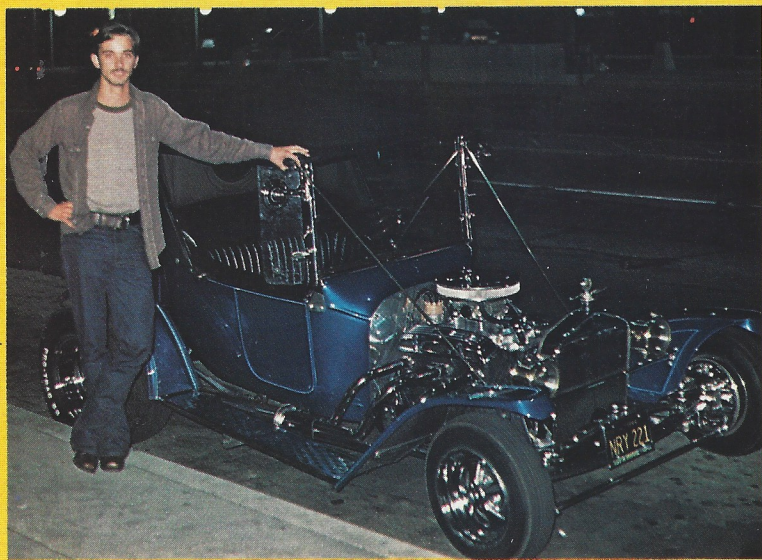


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# Nights In Van Nuys

# TOWN

PARK  
IN REAR



If you think America's love affair with the automobile is over, just take a ride around Van Nuys some night



BY GARY WITZENBURG

**V**an Nuys is a nice suburb of Los Angeles just northwest of Hollywood, and back in the "good old days" of the '50s and '60s it was the scene of an unofficial auto enthusiasts' meet and car show once a week, every week all year long. The car freaks would gather at the appropriate time in the evening with all kinds of automotive creations: street rods, show cars, real drag cars and whatever else could be driven or towed. Spectators lined Van Nuys Avenue (the main drag) for blocks, and proud car owners took turns parading their machinery, watching from store fronts, sidewalks and parking lots, and trading stories with their fellow fanatics.

Then a few years ago the Van Nuys thing cooled off a bit. The cops were on the hassle, the insurance cronies got carried away with their rating game, the Feds were hell-bent toward taking all the fun out of cars and driving (and still are) with oppressive safety, damageability and emissions requirements, and the automakers went along like docile kittens fearing that even token resistance would bring all the wrath of Congress upon their already bowed shoulders.

You all know the story. Compression ratios fell and smog-choked engines began having trouble running, much less performing. Then came the "energy crisis" and panic in Detroit followed by ever-decreasing engine sizes and axle ratios. And through it all the Feds haven't budged an inch—they'd rather we'd all ride the bus anyhow.

But a strange thing has happened. Instead of dying out, auto enthusiasm has merely gone underground to wait out the heat. "If we can't get good-running machinery from the carmakers," cried the carfreaks in unison, "we'll just damn well do it ourselves!" Just like they did 20 years ago before Detroit had seen the profit in high per-

**"People tell you 50 million ways to build a car, but you do your own thing and you dig it. Then you've got something to show for your money."**

formance created street rods and customs—cut-down Model A's and T's, '48 Fords and '55 Chevs, etc.—plus some fresh ideas in the last couple of years, like wild custom vans and mini-pickups.

And now, in spite of rip-off insurance rates, high gas prices, stone-age speed limits, and gestapo police tactics, performance is slowly but steadily emerging from the underground. There is even a ground-swell of renewed activity from the automakers, led by Pontiac Motor Division and accelerating involvement by such major aftermarket suppliers as Holley—which recently introduced its new "System" of performance carburetors and intake manifolds. And no one has to apologize for high performance to the ecology freaks any more, since properly-built engines will be more efficient and therefore have better gas mileage potential and improved emissions characteristics as well as more usable power. So you can be fast and ecologically responsible at the same time, if you know what you're doing.

We were in Los Angeles a few months ago and decided to visit Van Nuys to see what was going on. The Happening now takes place every Wednesday night from 9-10 PM. Why Wednesday? Noone seems to know for sure, but the 10 PM shut-down is due to a well-enforced local curfew: kids under 18 years have to be off of the street by 10 PM. Can you believe that?

We arrived, after fighting the L.A. freeways for half an hour, just in time to see the end of the festivities. We were riding with some Chrysler Corp. people and some West Coast news writers, 15 of us in a huge Dodge Maxi-Van, so we just joined the "parade" and drove up and down Van Nuys Ave.

It was quite a show. The California vans were out in force, some of them truly unbelievable. The "Low Riders" were also impressive in large numbers of mostly older sedans and convertibles, their undersides nearly dragging on the pavement. There were also plenty of neat customized mini-trucks on hand, and street rods, and hot TransAms, Camaros, Mustangs, Mopars, a sprinkling of custom bikes, and a lot of cops.

But everyone seemed to be having a grand time, waving and shouting to each other and looking at each others' cars. Those who were not parading lined the streets to watch and socialize, and the public parking lots were full to overflowing with kids and cars. Just like the good old days! The police seemed to be a general pain, harrassing people and writing tons of tickets for "car too low" or "steering wheel too small" or "improper lane change" or whatever they could think of; in spite of the fact that no-one appeared to be causing any trouble. We saw only one driver jumping in and out of lanes, hot-rodding through traffic and generally making a hazard of himself.

Our group was mostly middle-aged conservative types in suits (we had just come from a fancy dinner) and we must have looked a bit out of place cruising up and down in the bone-stock Maxi, hanging out of the windows and gaping at the kids and their cars. One kid

smiled from his carpeted and mural-sided burgundy Chevy van and wise-cracked "Why don't you guys go home to your wives?" We decided we'd seen enough and left. The thing was over anyway, and we hadn't had any time to get out and take any pictures or talk to anyone.

But *Cars* went back on Friday night to see what we could see and we did find some interesting cars and people cruising around. The first one we talked to was Rick Hoelzel, 18, from Sepulveda, Cal., the proud owner of a '71 Datsun pickup he calls "Sundowner." He said he has about \$2300 in the little green beauty but it is far from finished. The 1600 cc engine is still stock except for electronic ignition, but the truck has a front spoiler, mags, side pipes and some hand-cut Alpha Jewel lettering. Rick wants to add a cam and headers, or even a 327 Chevy engine, plus a sun roof and painted ocean scenes on the sides. He supports the truck with a part-time job, since he's still in school, and explained that it's the most important thing he has to put his money into. "It shows you've got something," he told us.

Then we spotted a really sharp bright-yellow pickup across the street and strolled over to check that out. It was a '50 Chevy owned by Lance Troup, who was overjoyed at a chance to talk about it. The engine is a balanced and blueprinted LT-1 Chevy 350, about 475 hp driving through a Borg Warner Super ST-10 4-speed and a 10-bolt Chevy rear end. It has '49 doors because they have no wind wings and make a cleaner-looking custom than the '50 doors, and there is a very clean black flame job on the yellow paint. Troup said he was unemployed, having just gotten out of the Navy. He had traded another car for the pickup and had been working on it for four months. The investment so far was about \$2500. Why? "Because I've wanted a hot rod ever since I was a kid. I've been interested in cars since the third grade and I've been coming down here since 1968." He also has a '69 Road Runner for everyday use—the pickup is mostly a showpiece.

Troup's truck also has '59 Cadillac taillights, which he said he was going to hook up to blink sequentially. The seats are \$300 high-back black leather buckets. Father and Son in Glendale, Calif., did all the chrome work, and the paint is by Jimbo, who draws the flames free-hand before masking and painting them. The job cost \$650, according to Troup.

While we were discussing Lance Troup's pickup, a fantastically clean and beautiful blue roadster pulled up to the curb. It was a '23 Model T Ford owned by 21-year-old Richard Berg, who runs his own business, Coldraft Refrigeration. Berg said he spent two years fixing up the T. He likes having something unusual. "People tell you 50 million ways to build a car, but you do your own thing and you dig it. Then you've got something to show for your money."

Berg's Ford has a metal body but sports fiberglass fenders that are copies of the originals. The headlights are brass and the windows are etched glass. Power comes

*(Continued on page 65)*

moved in place. You can also use shrink tubing, again from any electronic supply place. A little heat from a hair dryer shrinks the tubing just like the insulation on a ready made connector. Disassemblable pin, spade or multiple connectors can be used, even with soldered connections. Just solder the wire tips to the connectors.

Multiple connectors at the firewall are forever a source of incomplete circuits. The wire itself breaks much more seldom. The problem is usually at the junction of the wire and the connector element or in the connector itself. If it becomes impractical to repair this, locate the wires by color code from a wiring diagram. Now splice in a bypass wire which ties in on both sides of the bad element in the connector and do away with that particular junction. When a tail light wire buried full length in a harness is giving you problems don't even try to fix the break—just run a full length bypass wire. Like we told you, there is no mystery to electrical work. It just takes a set of meters to detect the problem and then the problem is easily fixed. In other words, testing beats guesswork.

## VAN NUYS

*Continued from page 32)*

from a 283 Chevy motor, and Ron's Customs did the paint work. Berg's first car, he told us, was a '38 Chevy, and he said he had about \$6000 in this one. He enjoys building such machines strictly as a hobby.

We talked briefly with a fellow who was driving by with his lady in a pretty dark green '36 Ford. We convinced him to stop and let us photograph the car, but we didn't get any information except that his name was Goody Hampton and that the Ford was 327 Chevy-powered. Goody Hampton, a friendly and easy-going man, told us essentially the same thing the others had. He loves cars and that's why he spends money on them. And he likes to come down to Van Nuys to show off his own machinery and to look at everyone else's.

There was also a primer-black '33 Ford coupe nearby, which was owned by a 21-year-old Tony Wood. Tony said the car had been stripped for racing when he found it and rescued it from a junk yard. He works for a record company and is looking for a part-time gas station job so he can put the money into the car. The investment so far adds up to about \$1500 for a 289 Ford engine hooked to a modified '67 Ford drivetrain, mag rears and chromed original front wheels. Wood said he did most of the

work himself, and that one problem he had run into was moving the steering back to the left side—it had been set up with center steering for drag racing. All his time and money goes into the car, and he is planning about another \$2000 worth of improvement in the near future: black lacquer paint with red flames, wooden running boards and a lot more.

Later on we encountered a couple of the "Low Riders" driving their own very specialized creations. The first was a beautiful '74 Monte Carlo with a really far-out lavender, blue and burgundy paint scheme. It had \$500-a-set spoke wheels and a hydraulically-operated lowering mechanism. If you want to show off, you can lower the oil pan right down on the ground; the cops give you the eyeball, you pump it back up to legal height. Owner Memo Sahagun told us the paint job was called "Rainbow Bridge" and was done by "Bugs," while the

pin-striping was by an artist named Dennis Jones. Of the \$1500 spent, \$700 went into the paint.

The other car was a '69 Grand Prix done in much the same style by owner Ed Rowlett, whose \$800 paint job was in candy blue and purple. Like Sahagun's, Rowlett's car was mostly stock underneath and was modified strictly for show. The next item to be added was black diamond tuck interior, then the Grand Prix will be entered in car shows. Rowlett said he already had \$1500 in it, which was spent gradually as it was earned.

Rowlett and Sahagun, both 19, explained the difference in philosophy between the Low Riders and the others. The Low Riders like to show their cars in competition for trophies and prizes. They get them as low to the ground as possible, using tiny wheels and tires so the bodies almost scrap the pavement. California laws says no part of the vehicle can be be-

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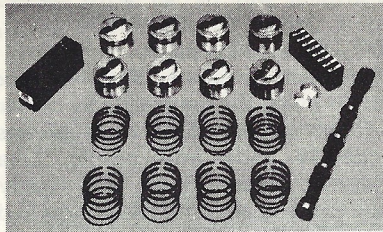
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low the bottom of the wheel rims (which is pretty low), but many who have the money install the adjustable hydraulic lowering units like the ones on Sahagun's Monte Carlo. Most of them are not into street or drag racing and feel the show is everything. Sahagun's car had already won three trophies at the Long Beach and Great Western car shows, for instance. They also use the same cars as street machines. By contrast, said Rowlett, "the van people fix up their vans just to show off for each other on the street." There is a lot of rivalry between the Low Riders and the other groups.

We had been told by someone earlier that we could really see some neat machinery at the Saturday night street races, which began at 12:30 a.m. at a certain parking lot even farther out in the suburbs. So we passed the time Saturday evening by visiting the Hollywood Motorama on Hollywood Blvd., where we saw the "cars of the Stars." Every car freak should visit the Motorama at least once if he can wrangle a trip to Hollywood, because there is some unbelievable stuff there. Besides race and show cars of various types, there are all kinds of one-off specials created for TV shows and movies, like a Plymouth Barracuda 500-cu. in. hemi and a huge rear spoiler, as driven by Robert Blake in a racing movie of a couple of years ago. Don't miss it.

When we got out to the site of the street races, we were amazed at the amount and the quality of the machinery already on hand. No show cars here, sports fans. This was the Real McCoy. There were the usual hot Camaros, Mustangs, Mopars, TransAms and a Vette or two, but also quite a few serious drag machines, most of which were towed rather than driven there. Except for the absence of light, the lot could have been the paddock area at a legitimate strip. People worked on, in and under their cars by flash and drop light, while spectators and less serious competitors milled around, socialized and checked out each other's cars.

We asked one guy when and where the races would be, and he just said: "They don't decide until the last minute." Some were apparently pairing off and sneaking away to make a run, so we decided to follow one hot-looking Camaro to see where he was headed. After driving several miles, we came upon a boulevard lined with cars—many of the same ones we had seen in the parking lot. "This is where they'll race," we thought as we found a place to park with the other "spectators." All night I had been amazed at the absence of the police. We hadn't seen one cop car anywhere,

and yet they must have known about all this.

It was about 2:30 a.m. by this time, and some of the cars were making short warm-up runs up the other side of the street, but we still hadn't seen anyone race. Then I heard a familiar noise—a helicopter. Suddenly a spotlight came out of the sky and the next thing we knew the place was full of cop cars and flashing lights. Everyone jumped into their cars and scattered, but the cops didn't bother anyone; they just made themselves very obvious.

Heading back toward the parking lot we spotted another "black and white" and decided to flag him down and talk to him. Then as we were turning around, we saw a couple of roadsters draggin' up the road toward us. They flew by, and we thought, "those guys are in a lot of trouble!" By the time we got back to the corner, both the dragsters and the cop car were long gone, so there was nothing to do but head back to the lot. Then we saw another cop turning into a side street and followed him. He stopped, wondering what we were up to, and we told him. "Oh, they've been doing this every Saturday all summer," he said, obviously not terribly concerned.

So it was all sort of a game, the kids getting in a race now and then and the cops trying to outsmart them and catch a few when they could. Back at the parking lot, the racers were busy fine-tuning their cars and the spectators were still busy spectating, and every so often a "black and white" would cruise through and give them the evil eye. And there were the two drag cars we had seen racing apparently uncaught. Score one for the kids.

We asked one young fellow why they spent all this money on their cars, and was it really worth it? "What else is there?" he asked, dead serious. So the next time some one tries to tell you that America's love affair with the automobile is over, just tell him to check with one of the kids out in Van Nuys—or on Woodward or Telegraph in Detroit—or anywhere else for that matter.

### OLDHAM

(Continued from page 6)

Opel steering wheel had higher set spokes to hook my thumbs into h ever.

Handling is as good or better than any other small car I've ever driven. The Chevette's Opel heritage is