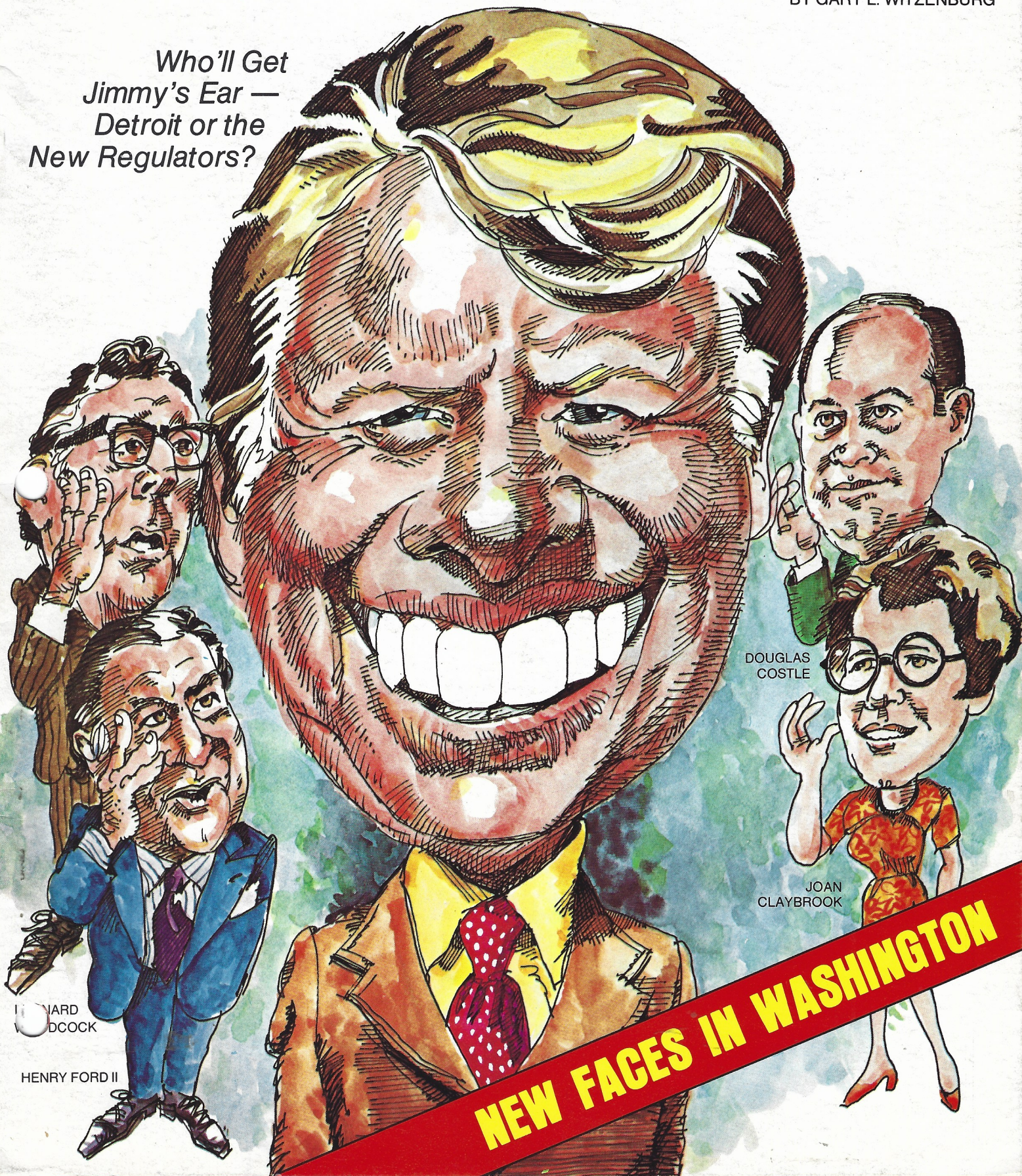


Who'll Get  
Jimmy's Ear —  
Detroit or the  
New Regulators?



DOUGLAS  
COSTLE

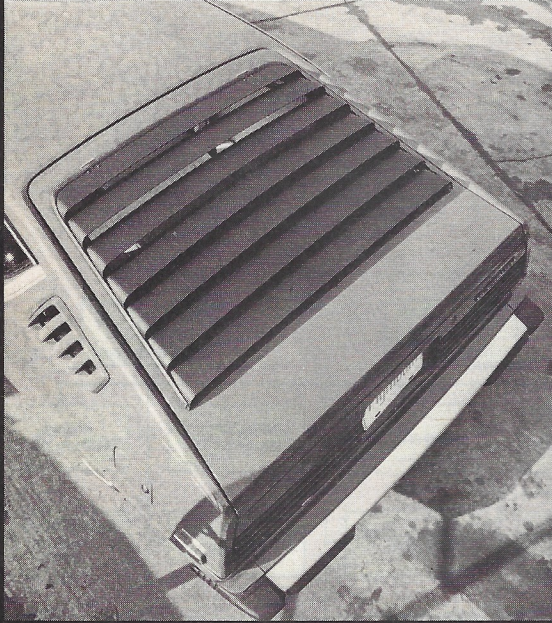
JOAN  
CLAYBROOK

WARD  
DROCK

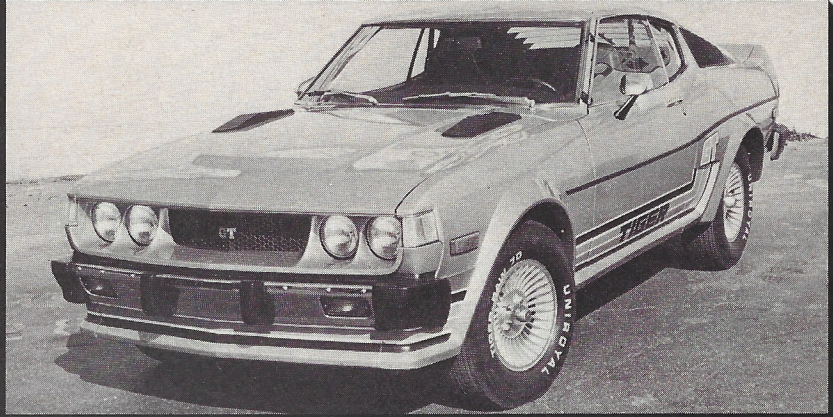
HENRY FORD II

**NEW FACES IN WASHINGTON**

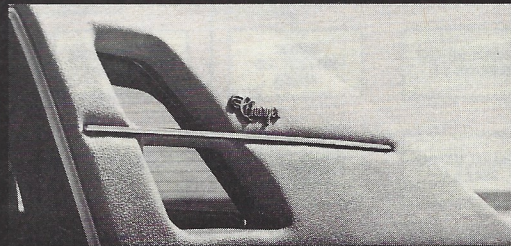
# The Story Behind Those Pse



Plymouth Arrow with louvered sunshade.



SET builds Toyota Celica Tiger with Motortown parts.



Midnight Charger has roof treatment . . .



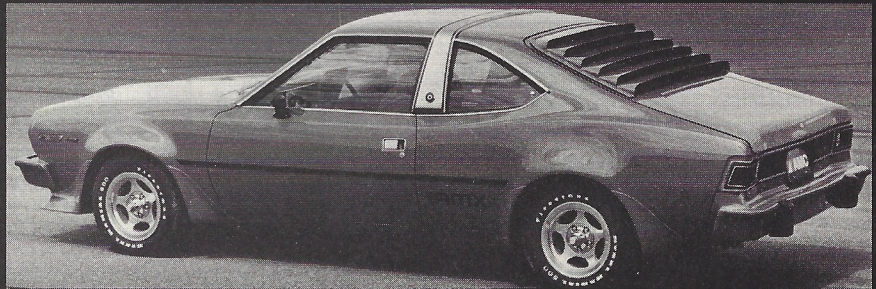
Motortown's original Mustang Cobra II.



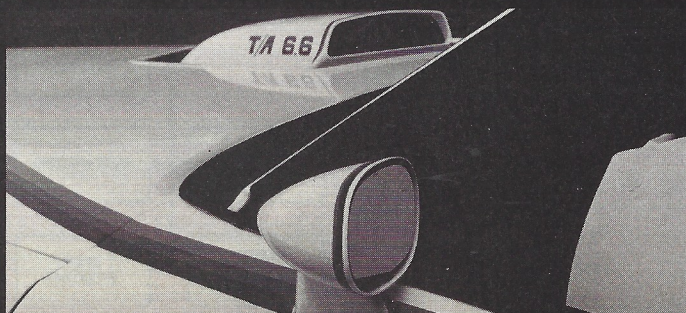
. . . and classic Cord-like grille.



Motortown employe installs roof band on Hornet.



AMX has shown surprising first-year popularity.



LeMans Can-Am: visuals by Motortown, performance by Pontiac.

# udo-Performance Cars

by Gary L. Witzenburg

**J**im Moran stepped back, the lights went down, and a dozen sharp explosions rocked the stage at Atlanta's Hyatt Regency Inn. Through the smoke emerged a milestone in import automotive marketing, as those in the startled audience rubbed their eyes.

It was the Toyota "Tiger," a gaudily-customized version of the No. 1 importer's popular Celica Liftback model.

Mr. Moran, who is president of Southeast Toyota Distributors Inc. (SET), the country's largest independent Toyota distributorship, and also heads the nation's number one Pontiac dealership (J. M. Pontiac in Pompano Beach, Fla.), plans to sell about 10,000 Tigers and other modified Toyotas in 1977—at \$700 to \$1,000 over the cars' unmodified prices. This represents nearly 10% of the 90,000 to 100,000 Toyotas of all types he intends to move this year in SET's Alabama, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina and South Carolina area.

Under the collective name "Future Cars," the seven special Toyotas include a luxury-oriented Corona 4-door ("Lucaya"), a trio of modified Corolla 2-doors ("Tiara," "Sundevil," and "Sun Chaser"), a macho-style mini-pickup ("Leatherneck"), and a "Luxury Celica" in addition to the heavily striped, louvered, flared and spoiled Tiger.

**To design, engineer, develop** and produce the highly-styled add-on body parts used to transform an ordinary Toyota into a so-called Future Car, SET called on Motortown Corp., a two-year-old specialty-car-building company based in Troy, Mich.

It was Motortown that hatched the idea of converting Mustang II hatchbacks into visual resurrections of the mid-1960s Shelby Cobra Mustang muscle cars, sold the idea to Ford Motor Co. as a 5,000-vehicle marketing experiment in mid-1975, and went on to produce nearly 27,000 copies before Ford moved production of them into its own plant for '77.

Current Motortown efforts include the "Super Pak" versions of Chrysler Corp.'s Plymouth Volare Road Runner and Dodge Aspen R/T, AMC's "AMX" Hornet hatchback, Pontiac's "Can-Am" LeMans coupe, Dodge's "Midnight Charger," and "Sport Pak" versions of both Chevrolet and GMC pickups in addition to the Southeast Toyota

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Pontiac's Firebird Trans Am, the only so-called 'muscle car' to survive the triple threat safety, emissions and fuel consciousness era . . . helped prove that the market for this kind of car never really died.

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project. And domestics Chevrolet, Ford Div. and Lincoln-Mercury Div. as well as imports Nissan (Datsun) USA, VW, Honda and British Leyland may soon join or rejoin the company's growing list of customers.

**Although the Toyota** modifications run as high as \$1,000, most Motortown packages add between \$150 and \$500 to the car's price at retail. The "Midnight Charger," for example, is listed as \$475 extra on the sticker while the Motortown portion of the Can-Am package runs \$375 extra (beyond that, Pontiac has an additional \$1,100 in performance goodies as part of the Can-Am grouping).

The formula is simple: take a car or truck (often, but not always, a weak-selling model), paste on an assortment of performance-image styling goodies (spoilers front and rear, quarter-window or backlight louvers, special wheels and tires, fender flares, stripes and identification decals), re-christen it in keeping with its new-found status, and push it forcefully into the market you want—usually the much-pursued "youth" segment.

**Inspiration for this concept** was provided by Pontiac's Firebird Trans-Am, the only so-called "muscle car" to survive the triple-threat safety, emissions and fuel-consciousness era. This hair-shirt macho-mobile is credited with almost single-handedly reviving buyer interest in exciting, performance-image automobiles in recent years; or, more accurately, it helped prove that the market for this kind of car never really died.

Because Toyota is already having little trouble unloading every car it brings ashore, Mr. Moran's SET organ-

ization would not seem to need the Future Cars hoopla to attract more customers. But the crafty Irishman says he was motivated to approach Motortown by his own personal plan-ahead philosophy. Even though demand for his Toyotas still exceeds supply, he is looking toward the time when either the demand tapers off or the supply increases.

"The worst thing you can be is complacent," he tells WAW. "There is no such thing in this business as standing still. Either you come up with new and better ways of doing things or you end up going backwards."

"Motortown's assignments in the past," he adds, "have mostly been to heat up cold cars. Well, we don't have any cold cars, but our purpose is to make hot cars hotter."

If past accomplishments are a fair indication, the SET chief's optimism may be well-founded. While Motortown's initial effort, the "Li'l Wide Track" Pontiac Astre, could be classed as only mildly successful, most everything the firm touched since has produced sweet fruit:

- The Vega "Nomad," styled after the classic Chevy Nomad 2-door wagons of the mid-'50s, began as a two-car promotion tailored specifically for Southwest and Pacific Coast Chevrolet dealers. But 3,000 copies were ultimately produced, and Nomad kits are still being sold for dealer installation.

- The Chevy Nova "Shark" was designed for Chicago-area dealers, who were buried under a staggering 165-day supply of compact Nova cars. The resulting showroom traffic and sales of all 500 Sharks, as well as a lot of ordinary Novas, helped cut that inventory almost in half in a matter of days.

- Road Runners currently account for 15.2% of low-line Plymouth Volare sales, says a Chrysler spokesman, and 44% of those go out the door with Motortown's "Super Pak" trim. Dodge Div.'s Aspen R/T is 19.7% of Aspen coupe sales, and 41% of those are the Super Pak version. Dodge is also planning on 10,000 sales this year of its new Motortown-modified Midnight Charger, which was publicly unveiled at the mid-January Detroit Auto Show.

- AMC's Hornet AMX is one of the few bright notes in the company's so-far rather dismal year. There's sur-

continued next page

## Performance Cars continued

prisingly strong buyer interest in the AMX, which was even featured on *Car and Driver's* February cover. "We've totally unbalanced AMC's order book," boasts Motortown National Sales Manager Alan S. Carpenter. "AMX orders are up to 40% of Hornet hatchback production, but we can't build them that fast." With well over 4,000 dealer orders in hand, the firm had completed some 3,600 AMXs as of early March and was turning them out at the rate of 80 per day on two shifts.

● Pontiac's Can-Am, a tastefully-customized LeMans coupe that amounts to the first new "honest" muscle car in years, also debuted at the Detroit Auto Show. Because of emissions regulations, Motortown can't touch the engines or drivetrains of its custom creations, restricting itself to adding only visual excitement. But Pontiac has thought-

fully certified the Can-Am with its most powerful 400-cid engine, a heavy-duty Turbo-Hydra-matic transmission and its best high-performance chassis for those who crave more than cosmetics in their automotive sex symbols. "If there are still some real super-car people out there," Mr. Carpenter tells *WAW*, "this one is for them." The original 2,500-car Can-Am commitment is already sold, and the build rate may soon be accelerated to 50 per day from the original 30-per-day pace which began March 1.

● Then there's the Cobra II, which proved so successful that Ford decided to add it to its Dearborn, Mich., Mustang II assembly line last fall. The division had completed 6,634 Cobra IIs through the end of February, which represents 8.65% of Mustang II production.

Founded in December 1974 by 20-

year auto industry veteran David L. Landrith, Motortown has grown in only two years into a company employing some 200 in 13 facilities in the U.S., Canada and Mexico. Mr. Landrith, a former officer of both Hurst Performance and American Sunroof Corp., served as the fledgling organization's president until recently moving on to pursue other interests, but he remains an active board member.

The company is currently co-managed by Vice President and General Manager John D. Davis and marketing Vice President James Wangers, whose name may ring a bell. He is considered the "father" of Pontiac's immortal GTO, and therefore of the whole muscle-car phenomenon some 13 years ago.

"We have the capability to present as many as four different concept vehicles to a given manufacturer in a

## Others Share Motortown's Pond

Motortown is certainly not the only company in the car modification business, but it is easily the largest. The producer of "Image Car" packages has the advantage of working directly with the manufacturers and distributors, plus mass-production capability. But there are plenty of others cashing in on car-buyers' continuing quest for individuality:

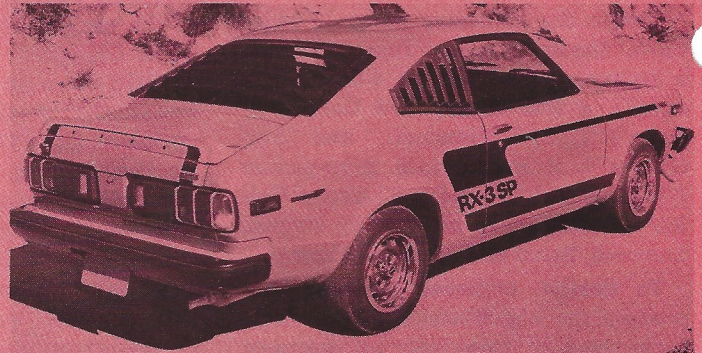
Southgate, Mich.'s American Sunroof Corp. is not only the sunroof-installation king in Detroit but also is building some racer-like customized L-M Capri IIs for distribution through 15 selected Lincoln-Mercury dealers. The company plans to build 2,000 of these "Capri II R/S" models in 1977.

Detroit's Hurst Performance Inc., famous for its high-performance gearshift linkages, Indy pace car conversions, Linda Vaughn ("Miss Hurst Golden Shifter") and other automotive contributions, perhaps was first in the total car custom OEM package field with its road-burning Hurst Olds conversions of the bygone muscle-car days. More recently, the company has been fitting Hurst Hatch "T-Top" roofs to various GM intermediate cars in such numbers that it can barely match demand.

The one-year-old Cars and Concepts of Brighton, Mich., is also cashing in on "T-Tops" with a contract to add them to Chrysler's compact Volares and Aspens that are ordered so equipped. While hatches and sunroofs are rather expensive options, demand for both is rapidly expanding as substitutes for the now-defunct domestic convertible.

Another fast-growing car converter is Roger Chastain Associates in Long Beach, Cal. Chastain is producing wild flared, striped and spoilered Capri IIs called "S/3's" as well as a 1,000-car run of modified Toyota Celicas and a performance-image version of Mazda's RX-3 coupe.

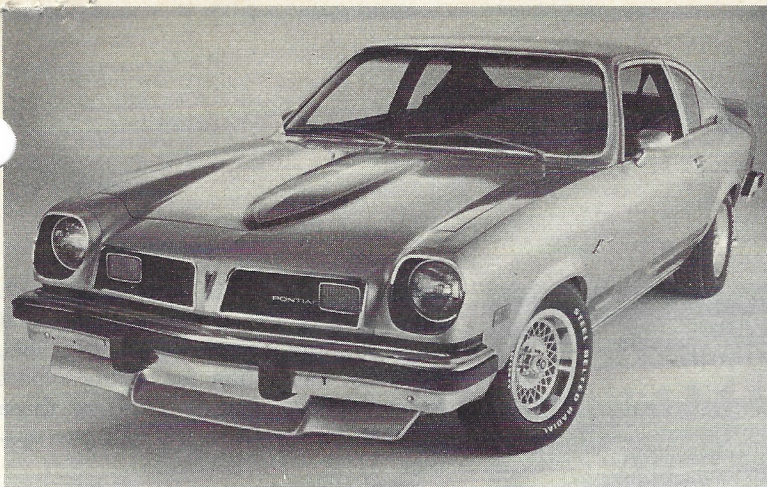
Meanwhile, a company called Michigan Automotive Techniques is building pseudo-racer "Monza Mirage" hatchback coupes for Chevrolet Div., while still another Capri II conversion (the "Turbo RSR"), offering a turbocharged engine and large Porsche-type rear spoiler, comes from ROKSTOK in Tigard, Ore.



Modification of Mazda's RX-3 SP sport coupe is handled by Roger Chastain Associates in Long Beach, Cal.

Another fertile field, lower-volume but offering high profit per unit, is super-luxury conversion work. A list of these concerns and their products would include: Bradford Coachworks—Lincoln Continental Formal Limousine, Formal Town Sedan and Executive Town Sedan (all with sunroofs); Coach Builders Limited (Pompano Beach, Fla.)—Se Lina handcrafted Cadillac convertible, based on the 1977 Coupe de Ville (50 cars planned at \$21,000 each); Grandeur Motorcar Corp. (Fort Lauderdale, Fla.)—Seville Opera Coupe 2-seater (100 copies at \$37,000) and Seville limousine, plus a convertible Seville planned for '78; Dunham Coach (Boonton, N.J.)—Corvado "Super-Fly"-type Eldorado/Corvette; MacGregor Conversions—Cadillac Landau Opera Coupe; Star Pontiac—Firebird Sunsport with optional open roof; Emess Coach Builders (Largo, Fla.)—GMC-Suburban-based 15-passenger limousine and numerous convertibles.

And then there are the many builders of modern-day classic-car replicas, kit cars and add-on parts such as spoilers, flares and stripes for those who like to build their own unique automotive ego-trips, plus custom van and truck converters far too numerous to mention. □



First Motortown conversion was '74 Pontiac Astro Li'l Wide Track.



Vega Nomad emulates classic styling of mid-50 Chevy wagons.

model year, and then to move from concept to clay model to tooling and to component production—all at no cost to the manufacturer,” Mr. Carpenter explains.

**Usual Motortown procedure** is to set up a local production facility near a carmaker’s assembly plant. Selected cars are taken from the end of the assembly line, appropriately modified, then sent back for shipment through the manufacturer’s normal distribution channels. The receiving dealers pick up the modification tab and make extra profit on it just as they do on ordinary options, the main difference being that they pay Motortown instead of the carmaker.

Dealers can benefit through increased floor traffic and interest in their products, particularly among the hard-to-attract younger shoppers; increased sales across their model lines due to a rub-off effect from the image cars; and, naturally, healthy markups on the modified cars themselves.

The manufacturers, of course, stand to benefit from increased consumer attention as well as boosted dealer sales, even though they invest nothing and don’t share in profits from the customized models.

An exception to the general rule, Southeast Toyota not only is the first marketer of domestically-modified import cars but also is the first Motortown customer to take on the modification task itself. The various trick parts are manufactured by Motortown and then shipped to SET’s 156,000 sq. ft. distribution facility in Jacksonville, la., for installation. SET makes 9.4% profit on the added retail prices of its customized cars, leaving the dealers a healthy 40% margin, says Mr. Moran.

Motortown is not yet engaged in selling its custom parts in the after-

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Motortown visualizes a fleet of motorhomes which would go to dealer lots and build custom vehicles on the spot. Thus a dealer could have a lackluster used Mustang II transformed magically into a Cobra II in a matter of hours.

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market, but it does retain ownership of all the tooling (since there is no manufacturer investment) and is free to move into the retail parts business whenever it chooses.

Motortown visualizes not too far down the road a fleet of motorhomes (operated by private businessmen on a franchise basis) which would go to dealer lots and build custom vehicles on the spot. Thus a dealer could have a lackluster used Mustang II transformed magically into a Cobra II, a Hornet changed into an AMX, or a Celica into a Tiger in a matter of hours.

“But this will be done with the same high-quality, OEM-approved components we put on the new cars,” Mr. Carpenter is quick to point out, “not with the cheap junk dealers have been accustomed to getting on a local basis.” Motortown add-on parts are thoroughly tested and developed both by their producers and by the OEM customers, and they come with the same 12-month, 12,000-mile warranty as the rest of the car.

Motortown grossed about \$1.6 million in 1975 and boosted that figure to more than \$8.5 million this past year. Upwards of \$17 million sales are projected for 1977, but because the company is privately-owned, its officers prefer not to discuss profits.

“Our business is not exceedingly profitable anyway,” Mr. Carpenter tells WAW, “because we maintain high margins for the dealers and also due to the costs of high-quality, well-trained labor, high quality materials, design and tooling expenses and expensive short-term rentals on plant facilities close to the assembly plants.” Nevertheless, the company has continuously managed to operate in the black ever since its modest beginning.

**There are other firms** in the business of custom-modifying new cars (see sidebar p.46), but none on so grand a scale as Motortown. “We really have no competitors,” Mr. Carpenter asserts. “The only serious competition we can visualize would be from the manufacturers themselves (as in the case of Ford’s Cobra II), but they’re usually too busy worrying about three and four years in the future to bother themselves with low-volume versions of current cars.”

Installing add-on parts in-house would also add complexity and could slow down assembly rates to the point where the overall productivity loss would far outweigh the potential benefit, he says.

It’s a fresh and thriving enterprise and Motortown appears to have pretty well cornered the current market. No one knows yet how large this market for pseudo muscle car creations might be, but if it can reach and maintain even its projected 1977 level, the added stimulus it provides can only bode well for the industry as a whole. □