

Petaluma's Coops to Coupes / 'American Graffiti' Sets the Stage

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There is a scene midway through "American Graffiti" where Paul Le Mat, as Big John Milner, from behind the wheel of his classic 1932 yellow Ford coupe, says: "Don't go overboard with this thing."

Le Mat never imagined the movie would be so alive 33 years later that young kids would come up to him quoting lines; that auto shop teachers would show it to classes; that groups from overseas would take walking tours of Petaluma streets where scenes from the movie were filmed; and that people around the country would confide to him that they put the movie on when they are sad.

"I never thought it would continue to touch people like this," Le Mat said. "It gives them something they apparently can't find in their world today. "

Petaluma, where most of the film was shot in 1972 after director George Lucas encountered resistance in San Rafael on his second night of filming there, has designated May 21 Cruisin' the Boulevard Day.

With Lucasfilm on board as the lead sponsor, 31 Bay Area artists have transformed miniature 1956 Chevy two-door hardtops into works of art. The finished pieces will be displayed downtown in conjunction with an all-day car show at the Petaluma Village Outlets. Later in the day, 175 classic cars will make their way along Petaluma's original cruising strip, which includes the six-block "American Graffiti" loop.

Le Mat will be there, as will Milner's original yellow '32 coupe and Bob Falfa's (played by Harrison Ford) black '55 Chevy sedan, the two cars forever linked by the

film's showdown race scene, which was set on Frates Road in east Petaluma.

Le Mat, who has not been back to Petaluma with the deuce coupe since the filming, hopes to make a historic pass down Petaluma Boulevard and back up Kentucky Street, though he concedes the once most-feared car in the valley has aged.

"The car overheats now," he said.

"American Graffiti" clearly influenced the choice of the '56 Chevy as the symbol of Petaluma and starting point for the artists participating in the public art project similar to those featuring cows in Chicago, hearts in San Francisco, guitars in Cleveland, lighthouses in Maine and boots in Wyoming.

The completed 3-by-5-foot cars will remain on display around town throughout the summer and then will be auctioned at a September sockhop,

with the proceeds going to the Petaluma Boys and Girls Clubs.

All the artists began the project in early April with identical white fiberglass shells that were trucked in from Nebraska. The finished products reflect divergent approaches and often radically different visions.

Adelle Counce, trained as an animator and fascinated by deep-sea fish, calls her car "Sharks Can't Drive."

"I'm not going for a higher purpose," she said. "I wanted to do something people would start laughing at, or not understand, which is fine, too. Meanwhile, I had a heck of a time keeping those eyes and teeth in."

The shark drivers and the chickens they run over are paper mache, covered with fiberglass and then covered with cloth, glue and enamel paint. Counce, who hails from rural British Columbia, admits she didn't know what a '56 Chevy looked like, in part because "everything

rusts, so there's not a lot of cruising in B.C."

Tim Cooper is a tattoo artist with a master of fine arts degree in sculpture. He chopped his car in half, fabricated an extension and then added a trombone player popping through the roof as the finishing touch on his "Bluesmobile."

"I used steel, fiberglass, brass and old Chevy emblems out of the '50s," he said. "I'm trying to get blues and music back into the parks."

"The '56 Chevy has been hot-rodded since day one," he said. "But the kids are all doing Honda cars now. The days of hanging out with motorheads, working in the garage, building motors from scratch -- they're lost."

Wendy Goldstein wanted to create a whimsical tribute to Petaluma's egg and poultry industry, which dates back to the 1800s.

"I have ceramic chickens with attitudes cruising the boulevard, dressed '50s style,

with saddle shoes, glasses and little socks," she said. "It was a struggle to coordinate the multiple stages of oil painting, car paints and ceramics."

Goldstein spent her early childhood on a ranch 10 miles from downtown Petaluma. At one point in the mid-1970s, Christo's famous "Running Fence" ran across the front yard of her parents' property.

"They had to separate it so we could get through," she said. "I remember it being 15 feet tall, and loud and bright and shimmery. It's one of my most inspirational memories."

Although the Petaluma cruising scene was defunct by the time she started driving in the 1980s, she said, she was moved watching "American Graffiti" as background for the art project.

"It made me think of my parents and their era, and the ending of high school and going forward, with all the emotions you are feeling," she said. "And, in an artistic

sense, I realized I loved the chrome and bright colors and curved lines of the old, heavy cars."

San Francisco artist Tami Sloan Tsark juxtaposes the carefree spirit of the '50s with some harder topics, such as the Cold War, segregation and the A- bomb.

"We remember the '50s as glorious times," she said, "but the events of that era play a big part in our history as well. Hopefully, my piece will encourage some dialogue between parents and their kids."

Richard Benbrook grew up in Petaluma and remembers the days when '56 Chevys were cruising Petaluma Boulevard and Kentucky Street.

"I was more of a hippie in high school, though," he said. "I drove a VW."

Benbrook, a sculptor and painter, once published a poetry magazine called The Tomcat. He decided to feature a beatnik dog driving

furiously to get to a 1950s poetry reading on time.

Deborah Garber transformed her car into an old-fashioned, black-and-white lace-up saddle shoe.

"To me, the shoe is symbolic of the era, as cars cruised the boulevards to the beat of rock 'n' roll," she said. "I tried to capture the simplicity of the times with my rendition of the inelegant, but sturdy and reliable, saddle shoe."

Mark Edwards may have undertaken the most ambitious project when he re-created Rembrandt's "Night Watch," stroke for stroke, on the front windshield of his car, only to realize he still had several other surfaces to contend with.

"My theme is 'Art in Petaluma or Bust,' " Edwards said. "Leonardo da Vinci is driving the car and reaching out and painting the 'Mona Lisa' on the side wall of the Petaluma train depot. Michelangelo is on the other

side, chipping 'David' as a chicken. Van Gogh is in the front seat, holding a tube of paint, and painting a Petaluma scene in his style. There are other odds and ends going on, too."

Edwards, an art instructor and illustrator, is excited the artwork will be so accessible.

"A lot of people who don't get to museums or galleries will flock to this project," he said.

Artist partners Beth Hartman and Margaret Starett concocted the prom-mobile, a gold- and silver-leafed creation with a crown on the roof, a tiara on the hood, a mesh skirt covering the rear bumper and LP records for wheels.

"I remember going to my eighth-grade dance back in the '50s and getting the feel for dressing up and doing the bop, a particular kind of really silly dance," Hartman said.

"Later, we'd 'drag the main' in San Rafael," she said. "You'd go slowly and try to make

noise with your car. We'd cruise in the evenings when it was still light so you could see who else was there."

As a final touch, Hartman and Starett used patinas on sections of the leaf to reflect the sky in three of the windows and the sunset in back.

Healdsburg artist Mylette Welch produced a two-toned black-and-salmon cruiser full of colorful dogs inside and out, with a '50s drive-in restaurant tray sticking out one window.

"I've been painting '50s-style cars and trucks and fast-food places forever," she said. "I hate the idea these things are going away."

She remembers cruising Fourth Street with her cousins in the late '50s in Santa Rosa, when the loop stretched from the Flamingo Hotel to Railroad Square. She also recalls watching "American Graffiti" at the old Analy Theater in Sebastopol.

"It was so exciting that the whole thing was so local," she said. "I brought my dogs, and they lay right outside on the sidewalk until the movie was over."

King of the Road

Before "American Graffiti" brought the character of John Milner rolling down the boulevard, there was a real-life version: Louis Baccala. He ruled the Petaluma side roads in the 1960s, and he too drove a '32 Ford coupe.

"I don't remember anybody ever beating him," said John Furrer, a prominent figure on the Petaluma car scene for 40 years.

"You didn't mess with Louis," said Bob Kendall, a member of the Pacers of Petaluma car club since 1959.

"He beat everybody up," said Larry Strain, a local mechanic who furnished some of the cars in "American Graffiti."

"I'd be at the movies sometimes," said Baccala, 62, "and kids would find me and tell me somebody new was in town looking for me.

"First I had a '58 Ford," he said. "Hot cars would come over from Sonoma then, really quick cars. But when I got the '32 and did a few things to it, I'd race anybody with any kind of car.

"Back then the car was red -- a five-window, full-fendered deuce-coupe, " he said. "It had low gears, which is how you get out of the hole. I'd run wrinkle-wall tires at 7 or 8 pounds of air. When you shut down, you had to back the throttle out real slow, which I learned the hard way the first time.

"Guys showed up with Corvettes and Camaros that were running 115 miles an hour in those days," Baccala said. "But after I got the car worked over, I was running 123 to 125 in the quarter-mile.

"You had to know how much traction you got, and different places had different traction,

and you had to know your car," he said.

"Still, your heart beat real fast sometimes."

Regardless of who was involved, or how fast the cars were, the ritual was essentially the same.

"You cruised between Washington Street and the bowling alley," Furrer said. "When somebody new came into town you had to find out how fast their car was, so there were a couple places where you'd test the guy out."

"You'd race from the bowling alley toward the rock quarry, just to see what was going on," Kendall said, "though you had to watch out for that sweeping left turn and the gravel."

"Then if it got serious, you'd take him over to the east side, where it's all housing now," Furrer said. "You raced south because you had more shut-down room, plus if the cops were out there, you could get it into a residential area, put it in somebody's driveway, turn out the lights and duck down."

"We did race on Frates Road back then, too," Kendall said. "Just like in the movie, between Lakeville and Adobe. It was straight as string -- no side streets or ranches, plenty of room to shut off -- so you couldn't really get into trouble.

"There was also a quarter-mile marked off on Washington, near the airport," he said. "It was all hay fields then. It was better to race toward town though, because if you raced toward Adobe and didn't shut down, you had the T intersection, which could be a little scary."

"Once you were done," Furrer said, "you made your way back to the boulevard and started cruising again like nothing had been going on."

Ironically, the 1973 release of "American Graffiti" may have foreshadowed the end of an era.

"Shortly after the movie came out, Petaluma put in an anti-cruising ordinance, and they

shut us down," said Furrer. "Kids today can't relate to what it was like."

"Kids today may not like the slow pace of cruising," said Cynthia Simmons, who leads "American Graffiti" walking tours of downtown Petaluma and owns a '56 Chevy Bel-Air.

"It would take you 20 minutes to get from the bowling alley to Washington, which is maybe a mile-and-a-half," Kendall said. "Kids seem to be in a hurry today, kind of like their music is. They might not have latched on to what we used to do."

"We lived in the best times," Baccala said. "Life was simple. You were respectful of each other. Even the racing was competition mostly among friends."

"The movie got it right," Furrer said. "You cruised because that's what you did."

Candy Clark, who earned an Oscar nomination for her role in the film as the Sandra Dee-inspired Debbie Dunham, cruised in Fort Worth,

Texas in the 1960s, along a 10-mile stretch from Carlson's Drive-In to the Lone Star Drive-In.

"American Graffiti" is almost like a documentary now, she said.

"People tell me they knew a guy just like Toad, or a girl just like Debbie, and parents turn their kids on to it," she said. "I feel like I was in 'The Wizard of Oz.' This film will be around as long as film can last."

Terry McGovern was the late-afternoon disc jockey on KSFO radio when he landed the part of Mr. Wolfe, a teacher at Dewey High School who encourages Richard Dreyfuss' character, Curt, to go off and see the world, even though he himself never did.

"I absolutely never thought the film would live on like it has -- every time I watch it, I still can't believe I'm in it," said McGovern, who remembers cruising the icy roads of Pittsburgh in the late 1950s to the unique

radio chatter of Wolfman Jack, the guiding background voice of the movie.

"He had the ability to talk a language everybody felt was especially for them," McGovern said of the late Wolfman, who broadcast in the film from a small station on Rovina Lane in south Petaluma.

"He was kind of like a priest," McGovern said. "He invoked this music, shared it with you, made sure you got it. That type of radio doesn't exist at all today."

Indeed, the film continues to remind us of much that doesn't exist today, which may explain its enduring popularity.

"It makes a few comments about life, and it depicts a moment in time," said Le Mat. "But it holds up."

"It's an honor to be in that movie," Clark said.

"It was a great blessing to get the part,"
said Le Mat. "It's a constant source of joy
for me."

-by Ted Gross

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