

STEEL, LEATHER AND GASOLINE

Steel, Leather and Gasoline: combinations that can make powerful men weak, weak men feel strong and virtually all men affected. Inauspicious in their origins, yet in their final forms, they are things of wonder; works of art. The blending of these disparate components is nowhere better rendered than in the classic automobile from the era roughly bracketed by the 1930's through the '50's. My bias is toward Donald Healey, with his Austin Healey 100, when he pulled these components together into a form that binds one's gut, brain and heart into a visceral experience of sight, sound, smell and feel.

Sir Donald stands out because he understood the emotional pull that Steel, Leather and Gasoline, in the form of the European open sports car, had on the American GI returning home after the World War II. The Healey 100 blends style with grit; the influence of Italian design sensitivity with British roughness, utilizing an engine and transmission from a truck. As an international marketing visionary Donald Healey built a machine for every man that made him feel like a very special man.

Here's how it happened for me.

It took me a little while to figure the car thing out. As a little kid growing up in the late 40's and early 50's cars were something for men with families. My dad had Buicks and Cadillac's; big luxurious 4 door cars with soft cushy fabric interiors and huge long folds of metal on the outside. My older brother had a Model A Ford with a rumble seat that was a lot fun to ride in, but it still seemed like an old person's car. For me, 1955 was the year that changed my life. The 55 Chevy with its new V8 engine brought cars roaring into my life. My friend, Dick Peterson had one painted dark gray and kind of pink. I was a freshman in high school in 1955 and Rock & Roll was changing life, as we knew it. Bill Haley and the Comets were rocking us around the clock, while Elvis terrorized our parents with his gyrating hips. James Dean showed us how to be cool as rebels with or without a cause. It was a neat time to be a kid.

At 14, I was not legally driving a car yet, other than running my dad's Roadmaster up and down the driveway, but I was practicing my cool riding with Dick in that Chevy. We'd drive around with the radio blasting, Splish Splash, I'm Taking a Bath, by Bobby Darrin, with our arms hanging out the windows. With our sleeves rolled up and skinny little arms pressed against the side of the car to make our muscles look bigger, we cruised the streets looking for "chicks". Dick had a "duck's ass" hair due, like Troy Donahue, and I had a buzz cut like a WW II fighter pilot. Wearing my car club jacket, I felt like a combination of a James Dean rebel and a Korean War Saber Jet pilot.

Car clubs were starting to be a big thing and my neighborhood buddies formed a club called *The Customs*. The club jacket was a deep blue wool gabardine with the words, *The Customs*, scrolled in silver thread on the back. At 4'11" and 98lbs, the jacket covered me like a tent, scarcely enhancing my self-image as a rebel, much less one with a cause. Cars and the pursuit of the intimate parts of girls were our main cause at the time. As I said, I

wasn't driving yet but I was there with my friends when the club started so I was an honorary car-less member.

It was the cars of the fifties that, not only defined our lives at the time, but also affected some of us for life. Over the four years of high school and my tenure in *The Customs*, the cars we drove were awesome compared to what most kids know today. Our cars were packed with cool stuff like four-barrel carburetors, $\frac{3}{4}$ race cams and Posi-traction 4/11 rear ends. They were lowered and channeled and chopped. We drove fearfully fast in straight lines and frightfully sloppy around bends. Our cars were made to go straight, quickly, and curves were a necessary burden that interfered with our ability to apply huge amounts of power to smoking tires and screaming transmissions. Tachometers were unknown to us at the time so we shifted according to the sound of the engine. When the clatter and roar reached a crescendo signaling imminent destruction, we shifted. The term we coined was, "floating the valves." Foot to the floor, you held in gear until the poor engine could go no further in revs or power. When it went into a state of frantic suspension of purpose, or "floating", we shifted. In truth it was more like a convulsive gasp for life than anything as peaceful as floating. It was testimonial to the ruggedness of those big American engines that they held together; never turning into shrapnel. Of course under harder strain on a drag strip some did become shrapnel, thus creating the need for a wholly new part called a "scatter shield".

It was during this time that I began living the life of a double agent. Starting in 1957 I surreptitiously subscribed to Road & Track Magazine. I don't know what made me do it because it was a terribly risky thing to do. I was driving a 57 Chevy that was a real tire smoker. I belonged to a car club devoted to American cars. But here I was, secretly reading Road & Track. I was becoming a closet Euromobilephile, lusting after European sports cars while pushing two tons of American iron down the road. I knew a salesman at a European car agency who let me drive used sports cars regularly. My friends, none the wiser, would have ridiculed me out of the car club had they known that I frequently drove those strange little "foreigny" cars. Repulsive to my buddies, the little cars were romantic and alluring to me. Their steel was almost art like in its form. Settled into the cockpit cocoon wrapped in rich leather, you looked out over a long narrow hood and felt the car transmit its spirit into your bones. The smell of gasoline, leather and oil were as much a visceral reality of these cars as the pressure in your gut as you slammed the beautiful little buggers around corners.

Through Road & Track magazine I became intimate friends were Juan Fangio, The Marquee de Portago, Mike Hawthorne, Peter Collins, Oliver Giendibien, Wolfgang Von Trip, Phil Hill and Ritchie Ginther, the Rodrigus brothers and, of course, Sterling Moss. Sterling and I had a particularly close bond, though I must confess he was unaware of it. These men and the names of the places where they raced were magical to me. Mille Miglia, Silverstone, Goodwood, the Nurnburg Ring, LeMans, Monsa, Spa, Carara PanAmerica jumped off the pages filling my mind with the sound and fury of the exploits of my new heroes.

One fall day in 1960 I was driving a MG, borrowed from my friend's car dealership and, hard as it may be to believe, this MG developed a problem that caused it to cease running. From around a bend in the road I heard the heavy throated sound of what turned out to be a Jaguar XK120. Being a good sports car comrade, this Jag driver stopped to offer help. In no time he had the little MG running again, but his contribution to my future would turn out to be profound beyond the mere fixing of my borrowed car. This fellow demonstrated the nobility of character that I imagined all of my racing heroes to possess. Everything about him ignited my desire to belong to this exotic group who drove European sports cars. His name was Robert Von Edescudy. I was convinced that the Von part of his name somehow made him related to Wolfgang Von Tripp, the renowned race driver from Germany, and that somehow everyone who drove these cars became like a European gentleman of means and daring do. We exchanged names and numbers and went about our way. I was smitten.

About a month later I got a call from Robert Von Edescudy telling me that he had seen a particularly nice sports car for sale and, remembering our meeting, thought I would be interested. I went to see it and was immediately shaken to my core by its lusty appearance. Relegated to a dark corner of an American dealership garage, it sat low slung, dark maroon in color, on chrome wire wheels with knock offs. Its steel and aluminum panels curved seductively, femininely, drawing my eye over its curvaceous body. From nose to tail ran two wide bands of white paint seemingly stretching the car beyond its diminutive twelve-foot length. "LeMans stripes", Robert Von Edescudy told me. Two rows of louvers ran the length of the hood and, of all the quaint things, there was a leather strap across the hood. That looked cool, I thought. Looking in through the low opening where a window should be, an aroma as pleasing as the scent of a rose filled my nose. Leather! The marvelous smell of soft black rolled European leather. Robert Von Edescudy told me that he would buy this car in a minute if he could and that I should do it without question. It was a very special car, he told me. At the time I didn't really understand what made this car special, but I knew that I had to have it.

"I have to have it", I told my parents that night at dinner. "Why?" you have a beautiful 57 Chevy that you supposedly love", retorted my dad. "Where did this sports car thing come from all of a sudden?", my dad asked with a logic that was lost on this college sophomore. Suddenly I was sorry that I had been so secretive about my growing sports car fanaticism. It did seem a little off the wall, trading a perfectly good American car for a funny little "foreign" car. As if through divine intervention, however, I convinced my parents that I should have this car. In short order I sold my go fast 57' Chev and the maroon Healey was mine. It was a 56 Austin Healey BN2-M that had a tonneau cover, a factory special order hardtop, special order chrome wire wheels, had just under 20,000 miles and as I was to find out later was a one off custom order 100M build in the last quarter of 56. The maroon color had been discontinued in 1955 and was only available on special order, as were chrome wires. I paid \$1500.00 and drove it away. Today it might be worth 60 times that number.

Quickly I learned that the owning of a British sports car is a life changing experience. The first challenge is simply acquiring the nomenclature. The thing covering the engine,

which is not an engine but a motor, is not a hood, but a bonnet. Exhaust ran through a silencer box rather than a muffler. The thing that covers you and keeps the rain off your head is not the top but, rather, the errant hood. The space in the back that we call a trunk, where you put your suitcase, isn't a trunk at all, but a boot. Up till then I thought that pioneer woman wore bonnets and military drill instructors put their boots in the dark places of a recruit's anatomy, but the British changed all that. On inclement days, you not only put up your hood to keep out the weather, but also attached plastic side curtains instead of roll up windows. Mind you, the hood attaches to the windscreen rather the windshield. And, when it came time to replenish the fuel, which wasn't gasoline but petrol, you found the filler pipe hidden inside the boot. Of course also in the boot, where normal people carried their suitcase, it was necessary to carry enough tools to qualify you as a mobile mechanic. And, these weren't just your average run of the mill tools!

Clever, the British! Who else could come up with a dimensional system that was neither metric nor standard? "*I say*", said some English noblemen, "Whitworth would be a ducky name for a measuring system! Confound the Krauts you know." The theory was that the German's tools wouldn't fit the Spitfires that plopped down on their soil after being shot out of the sky. Say what you want about the Italians, but nobody beats the Brits for making the simple complex and the complex unthinkable. So we have cars with nuts and bolts that require special tools-Whitworth tools. And, as any owner of an old British car knows, there is ample opportunity to become well acquainted with one's Whitworth tools.

I grew up in Minnesota. Minnesota can be a ferocious place to live; frightfully cold in the winter and jungle hot and humid in the summer. It was not the environment, during the 1950's and 60's, in which one would expect to find British cars successfully motoring about the countryside. I doubt Donald Healey ever envisioned his cars surviving in such an alien environment. I can attest to the fact of it, however, because I spent three glorious years proving that it can be done. Ignorant to reality, oblivious to pain and suffering, and a youthful will to go against the grain pretty well sums up this exercise in masochism.

I drove my 100M from 1960 through 1963 in summer and winter. Roasted my ass off in the summer and froze my wheeny off in the winter. Chains on the rear wheels pulled me through a lot of snow. A head bolt heater, plugged into house power every night, increased the probability of churning that big four banger up to a start in the mornings. Parking on the street, while going to the University of Minnesota, I had to dash out between every class hour to start the car, run it for a few minutes and then hotfoot it off to the next class. On a winter day, without being able to either run it or plug in the head bolt heater the Healey had tolerance to the cold for a max of two hours before the engine was doomed it to frozen dormancy.

We had a new SCCA Chapter and sports car racing was just starting up. We knew about Watkins Glen and Riverside, on the two coasts, but there were no tracks anywhere near us. Weekend races and gymkhanas were held in shopping center parking lots and at the baseball stadium lot. In the winter we raced on lakes, wearing chains. What a kick that was; ripping down an ice straightaway, sliding through a turn that was 4 to 5 times wider

than normal to accommodate the slide. Snow and ice went flying as the chains gouged sprays up like a boat's rooster tail. Incidentally, as far as I am concerned we invented studded tires. It was very common for guys to stick flat headed roofing nails through their tires between the tire and the tube. The pressure of the tube against the broad head of the nail held them in place-sort of. Brakes were of no use so you had to learn to drive with gears and slides. A favorite thrill was to run on a long lake with smooth ice, speed up to 60 or 70 MPH, then flip the wheel and tap the brakes, sending the car spinning across the shear ice. Six, eight, maybe ten doughnuts could be made if the conditions were right. Sir Donald would have been delighted, I think, to see his cars up to such mischief.

While the main racing action was on the two coasts we had access to the first major track in the Midwest just 300 or so miles across the state of Wisconsin. And, what a magnificent tract it was; Road America! In Elkhart Lakes, Wisconsin, Road America ran 3 major races each summer; the June Sprints, a professional race in July and a national SCCA event in August. Driving through the Wisconsin farm towns with a group of European sports cars caused quite a commotion. Most rural people had never seen anything like these cars. I had become part of a group at the U of M of guys with sports cars that included MG TFs and TDs, an MGA 1600 roadster and a 1600 coupe, a Jag 120DHC, a 140DHC and a 140FHC, a Triumph TR 2 and a TR3, an Alfa roadster and a Veloce Sprint coupe, Porsche Speedster and a 356 coupe, a 57 Healey 100-6, a Healey 100 and my Healey 100M. The common element that linked most of these cars was that many of us ran on a popular tire at the time called a Goodyear Blue Streak.

Streaking across Wisconsin, juking for position the whole way, we would pull into these little towns, park in a line on "Main Street" and go into a saloon for a local beer. Virtually every town in Wisconsin back then had a brewery that produced that town's version of someone's heritage brew of German beer. A dime a glass was the tariff of the time. A dollar would go a long way on altering one's perspective on life. Coming out of the bars it was not uncommon to find the population of the town turned out in the street ewing and awing over our cars, that were to them were as alien an object as a well pump was to us city folks. "Wow, look at the long hood on that one", one of them might say. "Can you imagine the size of the motor under there"? Fangio, himself, would have never felt more proud climbing into his car, pulling on his driving gloves and pushing the starter button than I did in my Healey on those glorious Wisconsin summer days. We'd fire the cars up to the cheers of the crowd and motor out of town with pipes rasping, gears whining and adrenalin flowing. Miraculously, all of the wild rides to Elkhart Lakes over the years ended with nothing but grand memories. We never had a serious crash, we never hurt anyone along the way, none of us were ever hurt and none of us were ever arrested. I can't remember anybody even getting a speeding ticket, although the Lord knows that we should have garnered many of them.

What a time it was for us Midwestern bumpkins to be at the races. Carrol Shelby was there driving Old Yeller, wearing his farmer bib overalls. Briggs Cunningham with his awesome stable of cars and equipment was a dominant presence. A couple of young California kids, Phil Hill and Dan Gurney, showed up frequently. A strapping kid from Texas named Jim Hall introduced some cars that, of all unbelievable things, had

automatic transmissions. Chaparrals they were called and everyone knew that they would never make it with auto transmissions. Little did we know that they would go on to be hugely successful and begin a technology shift in racecars? But, beyond all else the thing that exploded the gasoline running in my veins was the Meister Browser team of Augie Pabst with his magnificent Scarabs. Oh, my God! They were beyond comprehension. The scale and scope of the Meister Browser racing team was beyond my imagination, yet there it was in front of my eyes. Every dream, every image I ever had about the splendor and grandeur of motor racing was captured in the throaty roar of the Scarabs and the overwhelming equipage that made up that team.

After three years of such fun I opted again for some nice American comfort and bought a new Corvair Spyder. One month later, having fallen asleep late one night, I ran it into a telephone pole in a wreck that would surely have killed me had I been in the Healey.

It will take a story longer than this one to tell the tales of my three years in the Healey. For now let me just say that I drove it, raced it, made love in it and came to love it more than I even knew. I sold it for \$900 dollars to a kid who was going to drive it to Alaska and I have felt deep guilt ever since. The car undoubtedly died on the Alcan Highway somewhere and returned to the earth from whence it came. Undoubtedly it lies corroded and crumbling into the dirt, grass has grown over it and moose and caribou terds have all but entombed it. From dust to dust.

For 30 or so years after selling the Healey I still had dreams about the sensations of being with that car. The fragrance of the leather upholstery, the ever present smell of gasoline and oil, the visual sensation that flowed as you looked out of the close fitting cockpit enclave over the long bonnet dropping down to meet the wind and the sound of the big 4 banger grumbling into life after pushing the start button were vivid in my reoccurring dreams. I knew that someday I would again have an Austin Healey. And now, almost forty years later, I have another 56 Austin Healey. Not an M model this time, but a rakish black over red 100-4 that was frame up restored in 1989. With not more than 1000 miles during a ten period, I found it in the "proverbial" garage of a guy who initially planned to put the car to great use, but for a variety of reasons never got around to it. Since seeing a 1997 copy of the Healey magazine featuring a cover picture of a black and red 100, I had fanaticized about owning such a car. I imagined that when and if I set out to find one I would be embarking on a national, maybe an international search. Then one day my son came home and said that his girlfriend's dad had an old Healey in his garage. I called him. He said that he was not trying to sell the car, but that he might consider it. I made arrangements to see the car and with my heart beating, like a high school kid in back seat at a drive in with a new girl friend, I watched as this man uncovered a gleaming black and red beauty. I could scarcely contain myself, but knew that I must if I had any hope of negotiating a deal that would not send me to the poor house. We played bluffing games with each other for a month before the terms settled in to our mutual satisfaction. Finally, I sent a flat bed truck to pick up my new old Healey and my heart has hardly stopped pounding since.

I could go on with details and tales of exploits for many more pages, but suffice to say for now that Austin Healeys have had a significant impact on my life. Maybe someday I will write more of my memories of actual events of those glorious days of daring do when I tried to approximate the rakish behavior of those European gentleman sports car racers who lived their lives with Steel, Leather and Gasoline.

Tom O'Neill - April, 2009