

HOT STUFF

If you thought car lust went away with the Roadrunner and the Judge, think again

The spirit of Bunker Hill, Vicksburg and Iwo Jima lives. All across the nation, insurgency flares. Despite the proclamations of a heavy-handed civil service, in the face of the mailed fists of the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms of the Treasury Department—yes, even the Coast Guard—hundreds of thousands of Americans are driving and building cheater cars.

VWs with Super Vee engines. Camaros in full Trans-Am trim. Ford F-150s with monstercamotors.

You can oppress some of the people some of the time, but you can't keep a good street racer down.

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It is a lazy Sunday morning, heat waves shimmer through the draws of the canyon section of the City of the Angels. Nothing

by Leon Mandel

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BOB D'OLIVO

disturbs the weekend cocoons of the rich: not a whisper, not a bird fart, not the crash of a falling leaf. Inside million-dollar cottages, the poisons of the night before are gradually releasing their grip on the hearts and minds of naked, golden bodies, each more perfect than the next. Suddenly, as though it came from an impertinent mosquito attacking a window screen, the hush is interrupted by an insistent whine. The whine grows to a buzz, the buzz to a harsh whirr, the whirr to a scream.

The Killer Scirocco is loose.

As it shrieks by the stilled houses of the Laurel Canyon glitterati, it sounds reveille at one palace after another. Their occupants jolt upward from within silk sheets as though they were principals in a film strip of falling dominos run backward in

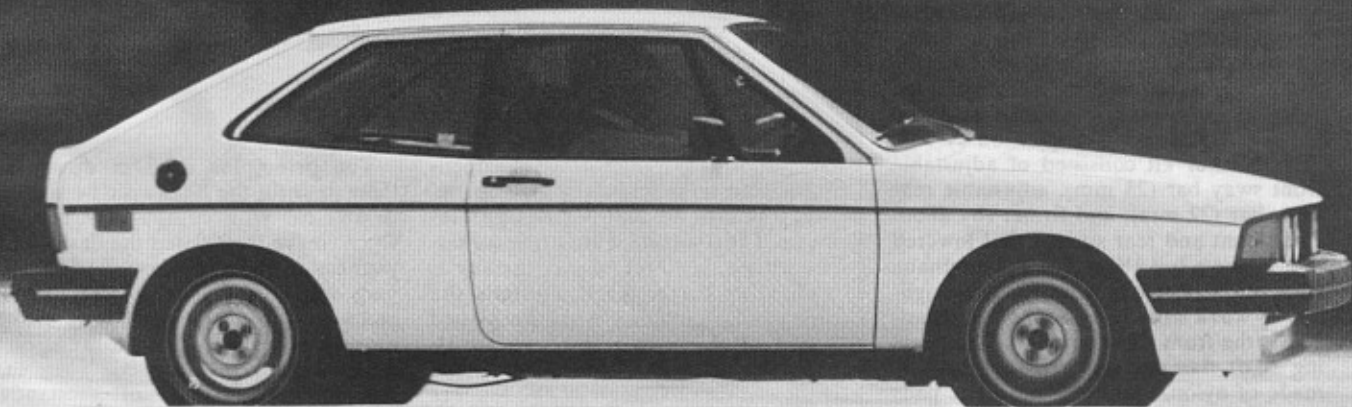
a projector. The Scirocco's driver, occupied with the task of keeping the rear wheels of his car from sliding into driveways, parked cars, hydrants and prowling parakeets, permits himself a tight grin at the thought of the social crimes he is committing. Not only is he awakening half the wealth in Los Angeles at 6 a.m., he is exceeding the speed limit by a factor of three.

That is nothing compared to what he intends to do. It is his aim, his goal, the very reason for his and his car's being, to shatter the absolute record for Mulholland Drive.

He is practicing to be King of the Mountain.

Except he wouldn't dream of actually trying. The Scirocco's owner/driver is no teen-age menace. He would never cruise over to Mulholland for an evening's semi-official racing. He is a respectable, upper-management number during the week. Weekends he is a car crazy. But his

The Underground Scirocco and other secret pleasures





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craziness is the lunacy of an IRA tactician. It is unseen in the outlines of his car. It is unrecorded in the ledgers of officialdom. Because it is understated, it is all the more successful. And pleasurable. The driver of the Killer Scirocco has gone to great trouble and cost to be a certified member of America's automotive Underground. Now he is on the prowl.

So far as the world is concerned, the Scirocco driver has no name; his car no license plate. For if it is not illegal to run a racer on the streets of Los Angeles, it is not municipal good manners, either. Like thousands of others, Captain Scirocco remains anonymous.

Most people who see his car think it equally undistinguished. They are wrong. It is one of the coolest, deadliest, quietest weapons in anyone's automotive arsenal.

Little did the elves of Wolfsburg who pushed one of thousands of Champagne Edition Sciroccos along the assembly lines dream they were midwifing the Killer Scirocco. It left Germany sometime during the twilight of the last decade, a cosmetic darling with a limp wrist. It was bought in California as a "sensible, sporty car"—good on mileage, good on looks. For two years, it hauled its master around like some discreet mechanical chauffeur, calling attention neither to him nor to itself.

But then (and here the image is of a sleeping innocent struck on his forehead by an eccentric moonbeam), the Scirocco's owner awoke one morning obsessed with the notion of speed. He had gone to bed a docile citizen. He arose an incipient outlaw.

Just as Captain Scirocco slips through society in his three-piece disguise, another corporado in a cubicled world, he decided his project car would be equally subdued—equally able to sustain a masquerade.

But inside it would be the Scarlet Pimpernel in the Kingdom of Freeways; here, there, everywhere, a secret slasher.

Captain Scirocco has done things right. From hood to deck, footprint to moonroof, the secret slasher has been given nothing but the best. Its imported-from-Germany dry-sump Super Vee engine makes 175 horsepower, surging through VW's close-ratio 5-speed and 3:71 final drive. The power goes down through the good graces of Centerline wheels with 6-inch rims, shod with Goodyear Eagles. Pollutants exit through an Ansel exhaust system. The Scarlet Pimpernel Scirocco sits 2 inches lower to the San Andreas fault than its less privileged brothers and sisters, the consequence of shorter springs. Adjustable Koni shocks mark the car's corners; there are anti-sway bars front and rear, and a canny conversion has put 4-wheel disc brakes at Captain Scirocco's disposal.

Nor have the more delicate pleasures of the driver been ignored. He is coddled by double throwdown, infinitely adjust-

able, break-the-Euro-dollar-bank Recaro seats; his aesthetic sensibilities soothed by a 20-watt per channel ASI stereo with six speakers.

Why deny yourself Pavarotti or Blondie just because you're up to breaking a lap record?

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A word about what Underground cars are not. They are not exotics. Exotics can't come into the country unless they are federalized. Federalized cars are blatantly legal. That makes them overground cars. Underground cars are not simple conversions, not even compound-complex conversions; those belong across the hall at *Hot Rod* magazine. Chevette 427s may be fascinating but they are gaudy. There is no such thing as a gaudy guerrilla fighter. Underground cars are also not Banzai Runners, that odd collection of ex-Can-Am cars and dry-lakes streakers that come out at night to terrorize California freeways.

Most surprisingly of all, Underground cars are not illegal. Well, not so far as the federal government is concerned. They do engender administrative grouching from a variety of state governments, though. Underground cars are also not the darlings of the free enterprise system if you listen to insurance companies. Underground cars are not anathemas to departments of motor vehicles in many states. They are not *prima facie* villains to highway patrols and state police. Let us listen to a collection of administrators and regulators, bewildered by a question about Underground cars and their place in society.

"Nobody here has ever gone to court over this, at least as long as I've been at NHTSA. VWs that go 130 mph, you say? Well, at the very least, their owners should invest in air bags. Still, you'd better ask George about this."

"The '66 Act (National Highway Traf-

fic Safety Act) specifically exempts consumers. In fact, NHTSA doesn't care if the car even has an engine. If I were you, I'd call the EPA."

"The Clean Air Act prohibits three categories of persons from tampering with emission systems: dealers, professional mechanics and fleet operators. Thirty or 40 states have anti-tampering laws. But about the only way they can enforce those is to have periodic motor vehicle inspection programs. Those are state matters."

"Periodic motor vehicle inspections? We've pretty well given up on the whole idea. Like other states, we've had our Office of Traffic Safety budget cut about in half. We can't afford programs like that. But I can tell you that some states in the upper Midwest have laws against so-called low riders. Pennsylvania and Hawaii have a long history of inspections in which they enforce their laws against replacement parts that aren't original or the equivalent. Maybe the Highway Patrol or the Department of Motor Vehicles has laws that apply."

"When we stop a car, about the only mechanical things we're concerned with are those that relate to safety. But if some guy put a racing engine in his street car and it was way overpowered and he got into a wreck with it, we might cite him for Driving in a Manner Not Prudent or Safe."

"Most departments of motor vehicles title by Vehicle Identification Number. That's a chassis number and we don't even check the engine. In this state, at least, we just verify the VIN. Maybe an auto club could help."

"We're a service organization for the motorist. Naturally, when I got a questionnaire from my insurance company asking if I had any 'racing modifications' on my car, I called and asked for a list of what they meant. They never sent it to me. Insurance companies don't seem to want their clients to get their hands on

lists like that. I ran it down, though. What they're talking about are things like 'blue-printed engines' and 'three-quarter race cams' and 'cheater slicks'. They sound like all they know about are hot rodders' modifications from the Sixties. Even after I identified myself, I couldn't get my hands on their lists of no-nos. Anyway, what you're talking about is going on out there for sure. Don't try to tell me that any half-smart highway patrolman can't tell the cars with the quartz-halogen lights. It's a question of enforcement."

Fortunately, nobody is enforcing the enforcers.


* * *

It is surprisingly flat east of Denver. The Rockies rise to the west, but there is nothing but Great Plains on the reciprocal horizon. Flat and straight as a hoe handle. The Porsche driver has picked early evening. His 911 is burbling along a secondary road stretching out through the clear air just before sunset. His audience is the cattle browsing mindlessly in adjoining fields. They can no more than the Colorado Highway Patrol distinguish this 911 from any other 911, although Porsche fanatics could spot the hogged-out fenderwells with no trouble at all. But other than the flares, the car could be any upper-middle-class cruiser out for an evening. It is not. It is a slightly cooled down RSR with a 911 Targa body. Its owner is the scion of a Great American Family who has always lusted after cars. Now he owns an Underground ultimate. Before the light fails, he will have pegged the speedo.

It is a good thing the scion and the Porsche are not cruising a road north of San Diego. At the very moment the RSR-in-drag is screaming through the Colorado evening, a nondescript pickup is lazily along that road, its driver smirking as he watches a Pantera grow large in the rearview mirror. It's not so much that the pickup has had remedial surgery on its underpinnings, it's the engine. The Pantera driver will soon find that out. What he will never know, as the pickup allows him to pass, then blasts back causing an F-15 shockwave, is that the pickup's engine once pushed former World Champion Denny Hulme to McLaren's last Can-Am pole position before the onslaught of the TurboPanzer 917s.

Five hundred miles to the north, a BMW aficionado has just lovingly fitted a 2002tii motor to his 320 (elsewhere in this issue), creating the car that Munich should have built in the first place. Shortly, laid-back Marin County will be stopped in mid-psychobabble by the sight of a low-roller Bimmer doing the Coast Highway at Parmalat Brabham speeds.

And somewhere west of Laramie...

Listen closely to the quivers and rumbles of the ground. Better yet, the Underground. You can still hear the heartbeat of car lovers across the land. 

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