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I went to Pebble Beach to worship; yea, to stand humbled before the glory of pure-bred machines from the ancient and noble marques of Europe. And while those bucketloads of Bugattis, fistfuls of Ferraris and, uhh, three Isotta-Fraschinis certainly were impressive, I accidentally sold my soul to Satan.

Specifically, it happened on the waterfront, where the rolling lawns of the Pebble Beach Lodge are lapped by the quiet waters of Carmel Bay, on California's central coast. For there, a discreet row or three behind star-cars like clothes king Ralph Lauren's immaculate Bugatti 57SC Atlantic – the stuff of Bburago models – was the space for Road-Racing Hot-Rods.

Now, if there's one thing I like, well, slightly less than a marvellously pedigreed and impeccably engineered car, it's a bucket-of-homicide, bastard hot-rod. Purists (like me) might turn up their noses at anything like the 1951 Troutman-Barnes Special or the 1955 Schaghticoke-Manning Special – neither moniker would work on cufflinks – but the fact is that such post-war specials grew out of necessity in the new world. A part of that necessity was the difficulty and cost of sourcing parts for exotic racing Alfa Romeos, Bugattis and Maseratis in far-flung countries like the US, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. The availability (and reliability) of big, under-stressed V8s led to several speedy, sacrilegious specials like Alvis-engined Alfa P3s and flathead Ford-engined Ferraris.

Another reason, entirely irksome to Euro-snobs, was the simple fact that a lot of those button fly-trousered, pencil-moustached, pomade-wearing European fancy-pants cars just weren't bloody fast enough.

Blokes with too much sun on their heads, too much time on their hands and too much testosterone in their pants came up instead with stuff like the Maybach Special. This famous Australian backyarder was built by Repco engineer Charlie Dean around a 3.8 litre, six-cylinder Maybach engine from a captured German scout car. It was good-looking, and highly effective in the hands of Stan Jones (father of 1980 World Champion, Alan).

In 1954's inaugural New Zealand Grand Prix, Jones used the makeshift Maybach racer to hose the likes of Peter Whitehead (Ferrari V12), Ken Wharton (supercharged BRM H16) and a youngster named Jack Brabham (Cooper-Bristol).

Meanwhile, America's rich history in racing specials was only lightly reflected in the eight or nine cars on show at Pebble Beach. Right at the end of the queue, however, I was arrested – nay, violated – by a canary-

coloured, whitewall-tyred, hell-beaten brute of a thing called Old Yeller Mk II.

I was less amused by the Disney-dog connotation, than frightened by the thought of what Mk I must have been like, y'know, before they obviously ironed all the bugs out...

What really drew me to this car was the big, goofy grin on the guy standing next to it. A chubby Japanese-American, he had a long ponytail hanging from beneath a '70s-style 'Bell stoker' flat-cap. Along with Ernie Nagamatsu, the Los Angeles dentist who owns the car, Bobby and his family were having the most fun of anybody here.

Bobby told me that this Buick V8-engined, lairy-canary special was built in 1959 by the late Max Balchowsky (*shurely, Charles Bukowski?*). Max was a racer and car-prepping legend who wrangled cars for Hollywood racing movies, including those used in Steve McQueen's *Bullitt*. You can even get a glimpse of Old Yeller Mk II, in all its vomit-liveried glory, in *Viva Las Vegas*.

Bobby and I were having a good old laugh. Mine stopped when he began telling me this car's history. There aren't many Ferraris, Porsches or Maseratis that can match it.

"This car was driven by Carroll Shelby, Bob Bondurant, Dan Gurney – that's Dan's helmet on the seat – when they were young, around 1960," Bobby smiled. "Max Balchowsky was a heck of a guy. He saw these guys that were good, and needed a ride, and so he said 'Hey, drive my car.' "One time, Carroll Shelby was leading a race. He was running away from the Maserati Birdcages when the transmission broke. So he says to Max, 'Why did the transmission break?' And Max scratches his head and says, 'I don't understand it. I just got that thing out of the junkyard and it should be good – I paid 75 bucks for it!'"

Bobby offered to start the motor. Through big, sucky Webers and a home-made manifold, the big, boofy, 6.6 litre Buick 'Nailhead' V8 made an evil whoofing sound I'd never heard before. It sounded more like a recording of a V8 engine being played backwards. And I'm pretty sure I heard it say, "Kill your parents."