

All that glitters is probably Fiberglass

There's no such thing as "too much" or "over the top" when it comes to these chariots of the Neo-Classic Age

by **JIM KOSCS**
photography by
MARC URBANO

TO SOME ENTHUSIASTS, they are the automotive equivalent of a Thomas Kinkade painting: inspired art to its owner, but kitschy wall decor to others. They are neo-classics, cars built mostly in the 1970s and '80s and often derided as caricatures of the 1930s cars they emulate.

Neo-classic owners, not surprisingly, take a different view. Ask the man (or woman) who owns one and you'll get an enthusiastic recitation of a neo-classic's benefits. It's a taste of 1930s grandeur, they say, but with greater comfort, driving ease, reliability, serviceability and safety. It's an affordable slice of heaven on wire-spoke wheels.

In any case, Clenets, Excaliburs, Zimmers and their ilk weren't made for car enthusiasts. They were built for Hollywood elite, pop singers, pro athletes and anyone else craving the spotlight. Today's buyers are mostly retired men in their 60s or older, according to Bob Simpson, whose dealership, Bob's Classics, in Clearwater, Florida, has sold 1,600 neo-classics over the past 23 years.

Numerous neo-classic makers came and went, with names like Baci, Centaur, Corsair, Johnson, Phillips Berlina, Sceptre, Sparks and Spartan. Most built only a handful of cars, but a few are notable for standing their ground for more than few years.



Excalibur: Where It All Began

Much credit — or blame — for the neo-classic trend belongs to one of America's most respected industrial designers, Brooks Stevens. In 1964, having rejuvenated Studebaker's aged Hawk and frumpy Lark, Stevens designed a radical concept for the fading carmaker: a two-seat sports car built on a Lark chassis with a design that mimicked the late-1920s Mercedes-Benz SSK.

Studebaker, which had lost its bet on the quasi-futuristic Avanti, understandably vetoed the idea. When Stevens exhibited his "Mercebaker" at the New York Auto Show anyway, buyers' deposit checks put him into the boutique car business, which sons David and Steve ran for years.

Named Excalibur SS for mythical English King Arthur's sword, the production version featured a 300-horsepower Corvette 327. The \$7,250 price in 1965 was a king's ransom when a Corvette convertible cost \$3,200. The door-less Excalibur was lighter, faster and scarier than the 'Vette. The first year, 56 were made.

Stevens called his car a "contemporary classic" or "neo-classic," according to Alice Preston, who started working in the Brooks Stevens Auto Museum in 1963 and then moved to the Excalibur factory in 1973. Today, she owns the company and its trademarks, running it as Camelot Classic Cars. Still in Milwaukee, Camelot provides maintenance, parts and complete restorations for Excaliburs of all years. Preston has the records for every one of the 3,268 cars built.

A homegrown chassis using Corvette suspension debuted for 1970, then a 454 Chevy big-block in 1972. The Excalibur remained fairly bare-bones through 1979, though, when the \$29,000 four-seat Series III Phaeton still had functional



side exhausts but lacked side windows. Excalibur made 367 cars that year.

Customers wanted more comfort, and Excalibur obliged, but not to everyone's liking.

"We all preferred the original cars. The later cars were like parade floats," Preston says, referring to the Series IV and V models, which aped the 1930s Mercedes-Benz 540K.

"The Series IV was Brooks' favorite," she adds. "But it weighed 4,800 pounds and only had a Chevy 305. Phyllis Diller bought one and returned it, because she said it was too slow."

The Series V models got more powerful Corvette 350s. Throughout, Excalibur made most of its own parts, including leather interiors, on-site.

Stevens' sons sold the business in 1986, and the company cycled through a series of owners Preston calls "clueless," ending in bankruptcy. Production finally stopped in 1997, when the Series V Touring Sedan cost \$75,000.

Clenet: Neo-Classic With a French Accent

In the late 1970s, if you wanted to turn more heads on Rodeo Drive than you could in such common runabouts as the Mercedes-Benz 450SL or Rolls-Royce Corniche, you bought a Clenet. The two-seat Clenet Roadster cost \$27,000 in 1977, when a 450SL was \$22,000.

"It started with my love of an era," Alain Clenet, the car's French-born creator, says. "I started making them because I wanted one myself."

The Excalibur Series II (this Phaeton dates from 1974) may have been a bit short on creature comforts, but it was relatively light and had plenty of power in the days before they became what current company owner Alice Preston calls "parade floats."



Named Excalibur for mythical English King Arthur's sword, the production version featured a 300-horsepower Corvette 327 and cost more than twice as much as America's sports car.

The former AMC designer imagined a car with pre-war elegance but modern reliability and amenities. When Clenet, then in his early 30s, displayed the prototype at the Los Angeles Auto Show in 1976, orders poured in.

"We had to get a factory and start building cars," he says.

Operating in an airplane hangar in Goleta, California, Clenet Coachworks built its Roadster on a Mercury Cougar chassis with a 351 V-8. The passenger cabin, including windshield, came from an MG Midget, stuffed to the brim with leather and wood. The rest was fiberglass, and chromed faux side exhausts were a neo-classic must.

Clenet built 248 of a planned 250 Roadsters through 1979, when the price had zoomed past \$65,000. Nearly all are accounted for on clenetcorner.com, a registry run by Tom Pierpoint, a Clenet owner who became close friends with the designer.

Singer Rod Stewart, whose 1978 ode to narcissism, "Da Ya Think I'm Sexy?" could have been the neo-classic drivers' anthem, owned a Clenet, and so did Las Vegas crooner Wayne Newton. Even Ford design chief Gene Bordinat, who put neo-classic touches on the 1969 Lincoln Continental Mark III, bought a Clenet.

Next came the four-seat Clenet Cabriolet, a.k.a. Series II. The Cougar chassis carried a body tub with true 1930s provenance — the Volkswagen Beetle. Undeterred by the car's odd proportions and inelegant details, actor Sylvester Stallone bought two. Just 175 were built, and Clenet went back to a two-seater, the \$75,000 Series III Asha, in 1982.

Softening sales and a broken partnership had by then put the company into a skid, and just 36 more cars were made before bankruptcy struck. A new venture

run by a former employee made another 15 before it, too, went under.

Today, with his sons Kelly and Damien, Clenet markets an adjustable bed called the Ergomotion. He occasionally takes Damien's Series I for a drive and admits that he enjoys the attention.

"It's amazing how many people want to ask about it," he says.

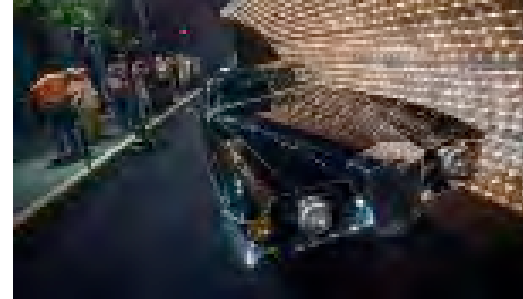
Zimmer: The Golden Spirit is Willing

Perhaps John DeLorean and Henrik Fisker might have had better luck in the car business had they entered it the way Art Zimmer did. In 1997, the Syracuse, New York, publisher stumbled upon a car with his name already on it, the Zimmer Golden Spirit, so he bought one. Then he bought the whole company out of bankruptcy.

Art wasn't related to Paul Zimmer,



The rich and famous loved the Clenet, with celebrity owners including Wayne Newton and Rod Stewart, who evidently favored his neo-classic over the Lamborghini Miura he once owned.



Preferred by Kings Everywhere

The 1971–88 Stutz Blackhawk doesn't quite fit the fiberglass mold of most neo-classics. It was a steel, coachbuilt model on a production car chassis whose appeal with kings adds intrigue.

The Stutz Blackhawk was inspired by a 1966 Ghia-built prototype that Virgil Exner designed for an attempted Duesenberg revival. Constructed on an Imperial chassis, the huge sedan caught the eye of New York financier James O' Donnell, who owned the Stutz trademarks and hired Exner and his son, Virgil, Jr., to adapt their design to a coupe to be built on a Pontiac Grand Prix chassis.

The first 26 Blackhawks were made alongside Maseratis by Italian coachbuilder Padane. Bodies were steel, hand-hammered over wooden bucks, and they echoed familiar Exner themes. The price in 1971 was \$27,000 and rose significantly each year.

For 1972, Stutz production moved to Carrozzeria Saturno, where it remained for the rest of the 17-year run that produced about 550 cars, including 50 four-doors built around an Olds Delta 88 or Pontiac Bonneville. When the Grand Prix was downsized for 1979, the Blackhawk moved to that larger chassis as well.

whose Zimmer Corp. manufactured pre-fab homes, conversion vans, boats and — in 1980 — neo-classic cars.

Beneath add-on fiberglass body parts that gave the Golden Spirit a 1930s facade was a Ford Mustang V-8 — including the Mustang's entire center body section — with the front wheels pushed 42 inches forward on a custom subframe. The powertrain remained in place, which meant a fuel-injected 225-horsepower engine for the 3,800-pound car. Zimmer spiffed up the Mustang interior with leather Recaro seats, a Nardi steering wheel, wood trim and crystal flower vases. Willie Nelson bought the first one.

A gold-plated bronze eagle hood ornament and teak-trimmed running boards were among the flourishes that

connoted luxury to the 1,500-or-so customers who bought Zimmers for \$60,000-plus through 1988, when the parent company entered bankruptcy.

"The car part of the business was making money. It was everything else that dragged it down," says Gary Hendrick, Art Zimmer's brother-in-law, who joined the revived company.

The "new" Zimmer built about a dozen cars a year on order, including one that Hendrick's wife, Ruth Zimmer Hendrick, sold to noted Iraqi car enthusiast and despot's scion, Uday Hussein.

"One night, during the Iraq war, we were watching CNN touring one of Uday's palaces, and the camera zoomed right in on his Zimmer," says Hendrick.

Two years ago, Art Zimmer sold the company to New Jersey software developer Eran Heyman, who is offering



new Mustang-based Golden Spirits for \$218,000.

Hendrick kept the parts business, and Ruth runs the Golden Spirit Club, which has several hundred members worldwide. They've got a sense of humor about it: The email newsletter is called "Zimmer B/S."



Beneath the skin, the Zimmer is mostly Mustang, with the chassis, engine and transmission all coming from Ford's pony car, although the skin is unique.

"That's for buy-sell," Hendrick says with a chuckle.

Classic Tiffany: The Knock-Off's Knock-Off

Made by the defunct Classic Motor Carriages (CMC) of Miami — once claimed to be the world's largest kit-car maker — the 1984–88 Classic

Tiffany applied the Zimmer formula but used the Mercury Cougar (by then a uni-body car) instead of a Mustang. Jewelry maker Tiffany & Co. stopped CMC from calling it just Tiffany.

Buyers could choose a V-6 or V-8, and the interior was stock Cougar in cloth or leather. Surprisingly, the

Zimmer spiffed up the Mustang interior with leather Recaro seats, a Nardi steering wheel and crystal vases. Willie Nelson bought the first one.

side-mount spare tires were real. Prices started at \$33,000, and about 500 were made before the manufacturer succumbed to legal troubles in the 1990s.

"The Tiffany is roomier and rides better than other neo-classics," says neo-classic dealer Simpson, whose daily driver is a 1988 model.

Epilogue: Neo-Classics Get the Last Laugh?

Neo-classic owners love their cars as much as any collector loves a true classic, but they probably just drive theirs more. Some neo-classics, including Clenets, Excaliburs and yes, even Zimmers, are eligible for judging in the Antique Automobile Club of America's Second Generation Collector Vehicle class. Maybe that makes them classic neo-classics?

For those who might scoff, it seems neo-classic owners could have the last laugh: Cars that seemed ludicrously expensive when new can command higher resale values than even those German luxury models that were engineered like no other car in the world. //

To see more images from our shoot, go to hagerty.com/neo-classics.

