

CIAS > HOT WHEELS



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An exhibit at CIAS will feature some historic Hot Wheels vehicles. From top, 1968 "Beatnik Bandit," based on a vehicle by Ed "Big Daddy" Roth; 1968 Custom Corvette; 1968 Custom Camaro, the first-ever Hot Wheels model.

World's largest small-car maker throwing 40th-birthday bash

Exhibit 'exciting for both kids and collectors'

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

In 2007, all auto manufacturers combined sold just over 1.65 million cars and trucks in Canada.

But that's peanuts to the world's largest car maker, which sells an average of 5 million vehicles in Canada annually. The company is Mattel and the cars are Hot Wheels.

This year, Hot Wheels celebrates its 40th birthday, and brings a new display to the Canadian International Auto Show. It's located in the North Building of the Metro Convention Centre.

"We worked closely with two collectors and they've gone into their personal collections," says Kathleen O'Hara, brand manager of Hot Wheels.

"We've created an exhibit that will be exciting for both kids and collectors. We'll have some of the early cars from 1969 and the 1970s, a ton of different Treasure Hunt collector cars, and even a comic book that originally came out with the brand. It'll go all the way to 2008, and some

of our newest, most exciting track sets."

While the cars are intended to be children's toys, they've become extremely popular with adults. O'Hara says the company doesn't break down its sales by age, but more than 200,000 people are registered on the company's collectors' website (hotwheelscollectors.com).

The little cars got their start in 1966, when Mattel co-founder Elliot Handler noticed that his grandchildren's die-cast cars didn't roll very well and weren't very exciting. He assembled a team to develop a line of fast-moving, brightly coloured cars. The first model, introduced in 1968, was a Chevrolet Camaro, followed by a Corvette that went on sale before the real car arrived in showrooms.

In 1969, a futuristic, dual-engined car called the "Twin Mill" became the first toy designed in-house. Since then, the company has produced an assortment of original designs and faithful reproductions, and says that the three billion it has sold worldwide is more than the number of vehicles sold by Ford, GM and Chrysler combined.

Originally priced at 59 cents, the

cars are still an inexpensive collectible, with single cars selling for around \$1 today. Some vintage models can command serious prices among collectors, with a 1969 Volkswagen "Beach Bomb" setting the record when it sold in 2000 for \$72,000 (U.S.).

The booth at the Toronto show won't have cars for sale, but will give away free items each day, including T-shirts, posters, lanyards, temporary tattoos and, this Monday, a special "Since '68" die-cast car to the first 1,000 visitors.

The company has a national promotion starting in April that will give children a chance to earn a "Licence 2 Play" at the Canadian site hotwheels.ca, along with an online birthday club and a downloadable widget to check for updates.

So in an age of video games, why is this low-tech toy still a best-seller?

"It's grounded in car culture, and offers toys with a chance for imaginative play," O'Hara says.

"Children can act out the driving that their parents do. They can take Hot Wheels to their friends', they can take them in the car. It gives them an opportunity to use their imaginations."