

Wheels



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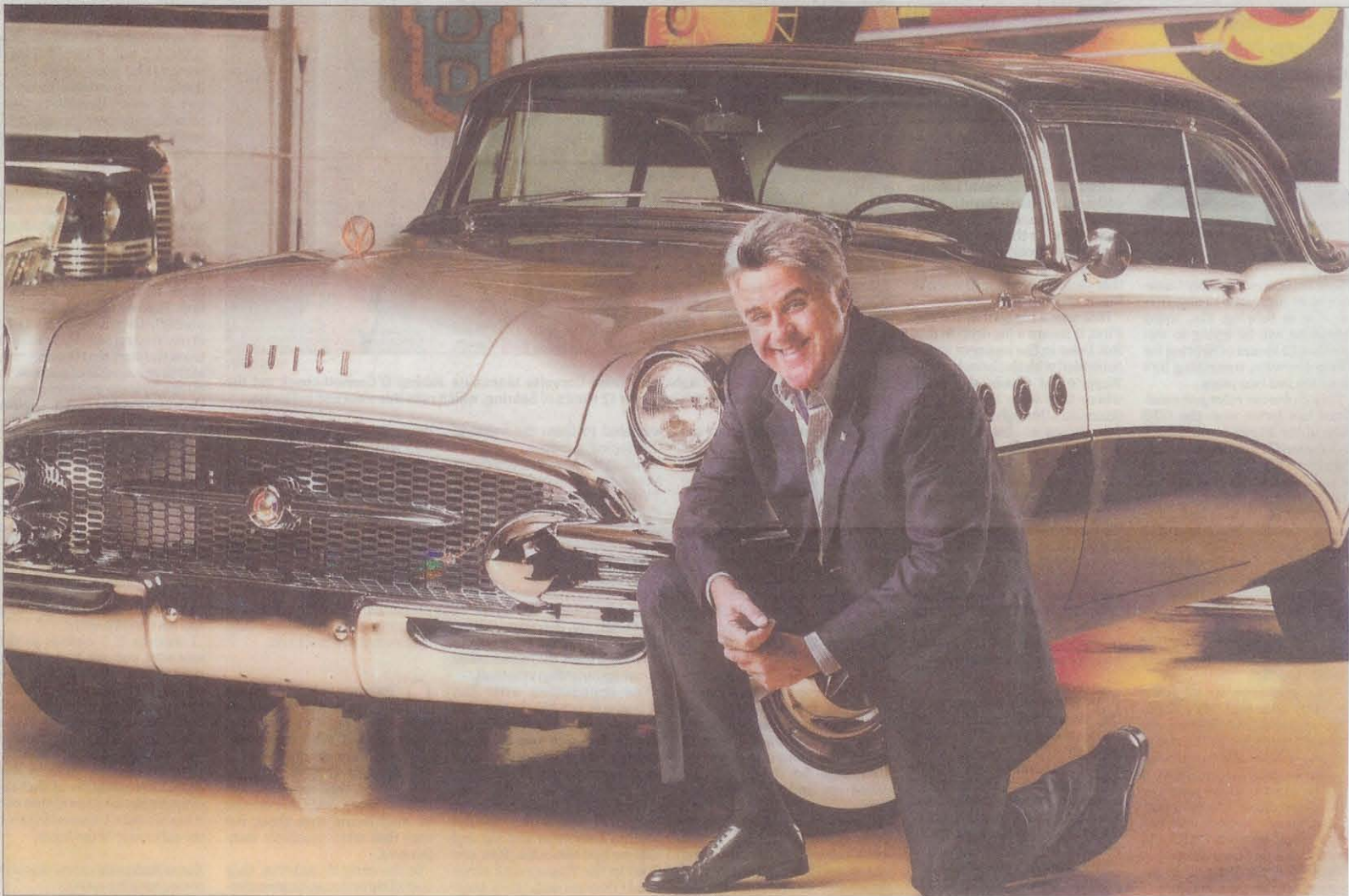


PHOTO COURTESY OF GENERAL MOTORS / SCOTT DAHLQUIST

Jay Leno paid \$350 for this 1955 Buick Roadmaster when he moved to California in 1972. It was in this car that he and his wife were first intimate — maybe that's why he's boosted what's under the hood.

The Collector King

JIL MCINTOSH
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Jay Leno is a god among gear-heads.

"Eighty cars and 80 bikes," is how he describes his collection, during a rare break at his Burbank, Calif., office. If he sounds matter-of-fact, it's just because he's doing what any enthusiasts would, if we had the money. It's not about the numbers. This is pure, raw, automotive passion.

All-consuming passion for automotive technology leads Tonight Show star to own 160 vehicles
And there isn't a single one of them Jay Leno doesn't drive — or will even think about selling

"They're both for the enjoyment and the entertainment," he says. "They're so much fun to drive. Most modern cars are more like appliances. You open a modern hood and it's swaths of plastic, hoses and wiring. On the older cars, when you open the

hood, everything is where it should be. There's lots of chrome and it's so attractive. It's not like today, where everything is covered up."

The king of late night returns to his stand-up comedy roots with a show at Casino Rama in

Orillia this coming Thursday.

When he talks about a car, in a rapid-fire patter, he mentions its horsepower, torque rating, wheelbase, weight and top speed like they're part of the car's model name. He knows every one of these cars intimately.

And that's the secret to Leno's almost fanatical interest in his machines. He likes to go fast — he has a motorcycle powered by a helicopter engine that redlines at 58,000 rpm — but what really intrigues him is engineering. He loves engines and technology.

"I have a friend who collects Maytag washing machine motors from 1917 to 1924 or so, back when they were outside the machine and very decorative. It's the same thing with older cars.

> Please see Leno, G28

Cover Story

The loves of Leno's gearhead life

► **Leno** From G1

"I find motorcycle engines more attractive because they're on the outside. Look at a Duesenberg or a Buick Straight 8. They look powerful and lean, they look attractive and they were styled."

With an estimated annual salary of \$17 million (U.S.) as host of NBC's *The Tonight Show*, Leno has been able to amass an eclectic assortment that really doesn't follow a theme. As long as he likes a car, it's in. That means everything from a 1915 Hispano-Suiza, a Spanish marque that was a high-performance car in its day, to a McLaren F1.

There is also no age limit. "I've got a Miata, and it's a terrific car," he says. "People don't always give them a good rap, but they've got the best handling and the best shifting."

If the vehicles in his three warehouses have anything in common, it's that most are out of the ordinary.

"I'm not a fan of the generic-type cars," Leno says.

"I mean mid-level American or Japanese four-door cars, cars that don't really have any personality. I tend to like cars that were ahead of their time."

That includes vehicles like his Doble, a steam car so advanced that it might have breathed new life into the antiquated propulsion, had speculators not forced it into bankruptcy.

Everything is roadworthy, and he drives everything

Or the 1916 Owen Magnetic, which Leno describes as an "early hybrid" (naturally, modern ones intrigue him equally)—a gasoline motor running an electric motor to operate the transmission.

I ask him about his Duesenberg, which most historians call the finest American car ever built. Because of their price and rarity, most collectors will only ever dream of owning one.

"Actually, I have five," Leno says. "It's just stupid, really."

He bristles when it's mentioned that some collectors compare driving the heavy "Duesie" today to piloting a truck.

"Older cars get a bad rap because people have done fixes on fixes," he says.

"You just need to put these things back the way they were. They were designed by the best engineers of their day, to do a specific job.

"People say, 'Oh, get rid of the six-volt system, it's no good.' But you look at the wiring and you realize that someone has used 12-volt wire with a six-volt system, or they've set it up to have too much compression.

"When you set these things up the way they were meant to be, you're driving them as they were supposed to be driven."

Leno's cars have to be different—and different definitely can be fun. Who else would think to build a steam-powered motorcycle, for example?

"It's got a 1936 Harley frame, a 1902 steam engine, and the boiler is a heat exchanger from a Titan missile I got from the Air Force," he says. "It's still in the stages of putting it together, but it goes okay."

He was given the opportunity to ride the Tomahawk, DaimlerChrysler's beyond-wild concept motorcycle that incorporates a V10 engine, but he's going to pass on buying one.

"It doesn't turn," he says. "It weighs 1,500 pounds. By comparison, my jet bike weighs 460 pounds and it goes pretty good. I've got about 500 miles on it."

And you're just as likely to catch him in his "tank car," an oversized, hand-built Blastolene Special that originally toured the show circuit. Leno

had it rebuilt to make it street legal — if such a term can even apply to anything so wild.

"It's the answer to a question nobody asked," he says. "It's got an M47 Patton tank engine that's 1,800 cubic inches, 990 horsepower, 1,600 lb.-ft., 190-inch wheelbase, and it weighs just under five tons. It's hilarious. It's a hot rod on steroids. It's like what foreign people think all Americans drive around in. People say, 'Do you have a sexual problem?' and I say, 'Yes, yes, I do.'"

But Leno's garage is no museum. Everything is roadworthy, and he drives everything.

An early articulator when it came to things automotive, his first vehicle was a 1934 Ford pickup, purchased when he was 14. Although he could only use it in the driveway, it was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

From his boyhood home in Massachusetts, he arrived in

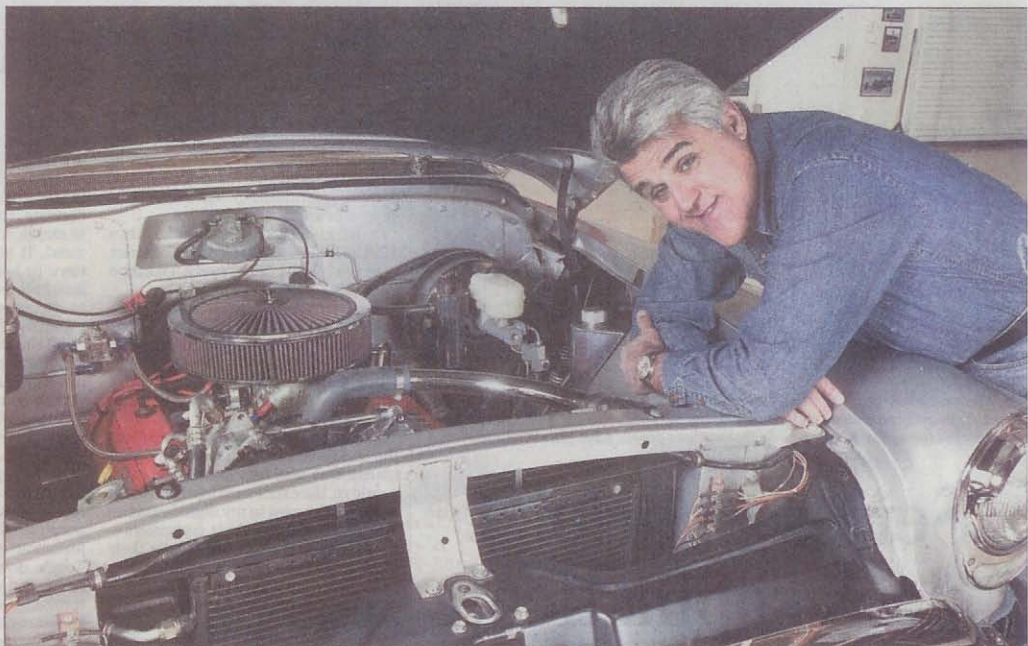


PHOTO COURTESY OF GENERAL MOTORS / JIM FRENK

Leno checks out the 620 hp Crate engine of his Buick Roadmaster, above. He likes 'em big: His Y2K jet bike, right, was the first production model built by Louisiana-based MMT.

California to pursue a career. In 1972, he paid \$350 for a 1955 Buick Roadmaster.

As success came his way, he bought a Sunbeam Tiger and then his first new car, a Mercedes. But he kept the Buick, and recently decided to rebuild it.

"I had the car and said, why not have some fun with it?" he says.

"You always go back to your first love. I felt guilty and I had to take care of it, like I hadn't paid child support to it."

On the outside, it now looks like it could sit on a 1955 showroom floor. But open the hood on this sleeper. That's where a shop stuffed a ZZ572 crate engine, fresh from General Motors — they even put his name on the rocker covers — that makes 620 hp and 650 lb.-ft. of torque.

"I met my wife in that car, and it's the first place we got intimate," he confides.

"We figured that, 20 years later, the car's all done, so let's try it again. We went to the place, but now it's a housing development and there's a house on that spot. Okay, but it's one o'clock in the morning, so we're in the driveway. But when you're 22, it's easy; when you're 50, it isn't. I hit the horn, and some guy came out yelling at us..."

The Buick shares one thing with every car in the collection: it will never be for sale. Leno never parts with anything.

"I grow very attached to these things," he says.

"Hey, I'm still on the same wife 23 years later, and how unusual is that in this town? I'm keeping it all."



PHOTO COURTESY OF MMT



MICHAEL LEEDS / BLASTOLENE

Leno takes delivery of his five-tonne, 990 hp Blastolene Special from builder Randy Grubb.