

George Barris

King of the Kustomizers

TEXT AND IMAGES BY
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King of the Kustomizers George Barris enjoys sitting in the central office, surrounded by his models. In his hands is a chrome Batmobile.

Rarely has a more spirited personality been found than that of George Barris. And why not? He's been responsible for some of the hippest Hollywood cars: the Batmobile, KITT, Monkeemobile, Drag-U-La, Munster Koach, General Lee, the A-Team Van and Vette – he crafted these and more. Now, who wouldn't want that job?

"It started a long time ago," said George. "My brother, Sam, and I moved from Chicago to Roseville, California after my parents died to live with my aunt and uncle. That was the late '20s."

The boys worked at the family restaurant, were good

students in school and excelled in art and drama. The family gave them a 1925 Buick which would become the first true Barris Kustom. Painted orange with blue stripes, George straightened out a lot of the body, and added various custom components to create a unique ride. It was sold quickly, and the boys bought a Model A Ford, and later, a 1936 Ford cabriolet which led to his first commercial client.

"You know, back then, they didn't have the catalogue, bolt-on accessories they do today," he said. "Back then you had to actually make the piece you wanted from scratch, or remake a part from another car."

Even today, George likes getting a hold of catalogue custom parts and redesigning them to make them uniquely his, he said. Recently, George customized a Toyota Prius for the show circuit and it was a smash hit.

“New cars have a lot of possibilities,” he said. “They’re pretty easy to work with, and their simply put together. They’re fun.”

Shortly after the sale of the '36 Ford, George started the Kustom Car Club, the first time a “K” had been used in place of the “C.”

“A lot of people wonder what made me think of that,” he chuckles. “We’re Greek – everything should be spelled with a K!”

George moved to Los Angeles, Sam having entered World War II, and opened a shop in Bell. When Sam joined him in 1945, they expanded to a shop in Compton called the Barris Brother’s Kustom Shop. From here, George really began promoting and experimenting with various paints and designs, making Barris a bit of a household name. They began working car shows, and found frequently that they were the only customized car on the field, and beyond that, discovered that people loved Barris Kustoms.

“By this time, a lot of magazines were popping up, giving us a way to expose our work to the world,” he said. “Robert Petersen, who founded Hot Rod and Motor Trend magazines, was one of the best. He put on events, ran magazines, promoted a lot of the kustom culture, and I was able to work as a writer and photographer at a lot of events.”

It wasn’t long before George was approached by Hollywood to craft vehicles for movies. The first effort came in 1958 with “High School Confidential,” a pop culture teen film in which George reworked a couple of '48 Chevrolets. Soon after, George began soliciting the studios for business customizing movie cars, and it’s paid off in dividends.

“Cars and stars go together, and a movie is more memorable when it’s featuring some kind of special car,” he said. “The hotter the car, the hotter the movie!”

The list of clients George has crafted cars for reads like a who’s who of fame – Zsa Zsa Gabor, Farrah Fawcett, Redd Foxx, James Caan, The Beach Boys, Sammy Davis Jr., Frank Sinatra, Nancy Sinatra, Barry Goldwater, Elvis Presley, Roger Penske, Sonny and Cher, John Wayne...the list appear endless. Frequently, the cars only needed repaints and touch ups, but now and again, someone would come along and commission an entire custom job. In his book, *Barris Cars of the Stars*, co-authored with David Fetherston, he highlights working with many of his celebrity clients, including Clint Eastwood, repainting his well-used Ferrari 275GTB in a light metallic green and building a Mini Cooper for him with power windows.

“He was a very gracious guy, and he came to help me out with the voice-over for the soundtrack of a film we were making on the assembly of one of my Barris AMF custom



Some of the original jackets Barris had created to promote his company and products.

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The original Drag-U-LA from The Munster’s television series. Fully restored, it’s been brought back to original glory, complete with modern muscle, brakes, tires.

bikes,” George comments in the book.

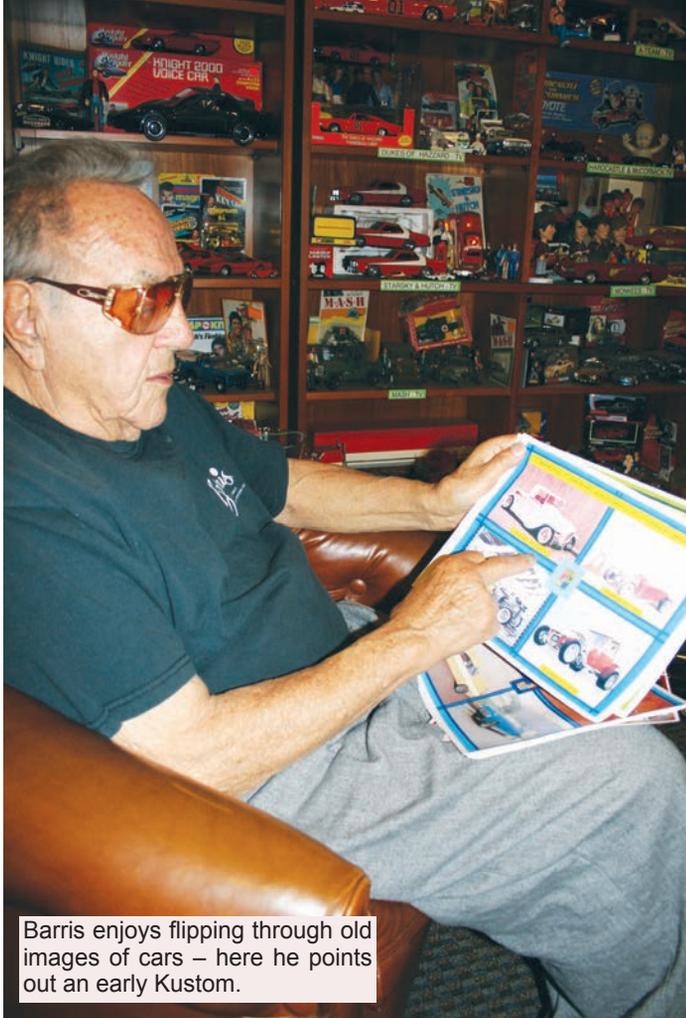
When George would make a car for a movie or television program, he would have the chance to meet everyone, including the stars, he said. It was through these introductions, plus being able to share his talents firsthand with them, that he would gain their trust and respect.

“Yvonne DeCarlo, who played Lily Munster on “The Munsters” was really fond of the Drag-U-La and Munster Coach we built,” he said. “When she bought a Jaguar in the mid-1960’s, she brought it to us for some ideas, and we turned it into a car reflecting her show personality. It was painted with a number of coats of black enamel, had gold coffin handles as the luggage rack, coffin curtains in the windows – slick car.”

The Eastwood Ferrari and DeCarlo Jaguar demonstrate well the breadth of talent Barris could bestow on a car. A visit



Part of the Barris Kustom Showroom is home to an original Batmobile and KITT, from Knight Rider. A replica of James Dean’s 550 Porsche called Little Bastard adds to the allure. The floors are polished and sealed concrete.



Barris enjoys flipping through old images of cars – here he points out an early Kustom.

to Barris' shop in Toluca Lake, California is like a trip through Hollywood history – black and white pictures everywhere of celebrities and cars, movie posters all over the place, and toys – lots and lots of plastic and die cast replicas of movie and

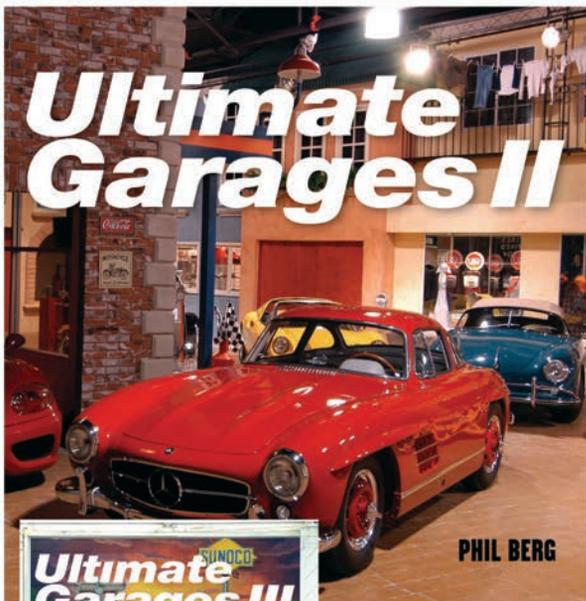
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film cars. During our visit, George sat at a desk, surrounded literally by hundreds of papers, each in stacks, George scribbling something on them. For a moment it was like watching a madman obsessed with an all-consuming project, as he busied himself while snapping pictures of his showroom.

“It’s all marketing, we’re always letting people know where we are and what we’re doing,” he said. “If you want to be successful, it’s what you do. Well, that and work.”

As if the stacks of paper weren’t enough, the backroom of the Barris Headquarters holds literally thousands of pictures, documents and memorabilia pertaining to the Barris cars. Boxes with block letters in permanent marker reading “PRINCE,” “PEARL JAM,” “OSCAR MAYER,” “BEE-GEES,” and “BEATLES” to name just a few. The history of entertainment and automobiles within the Barris building is mind blowing.

“We document everything, from photographs to paperwork, we have kept track of most everything we’ve ever done,” he said. “It’s a lot of work, but it’s a great way to earn a living – I’d trade it for nothing.” GSM



PHIL BERG

Ultimate Garages II
By Phil Berg



Man Caves For Car Men

When you’re building a kitchen, you don’t tour the Waffle House for ideas, you take a look at Martha Stewart’s set, at Wolfgang Puck’s own home grille, and even at Rachel Ray’s party room. So it’s the same with garages: The hardware store is not a place for inspiration. For the ultimate group of car collectors and restorers, only the ultimate garage will do. In this larger, lavishly illustrated sequel to the best-selling Ultimate Garages, author Phil Berg takes readers inside more than two dozen exotic private garages that house some of the rarest and most beautiful cars in the world, foster-parented by the most remarkable collectors in the country.

For the enthusiasts exposed in this book, a garage is more than just a place to store and service cars. It’s often a showroom designed to display their collections in the best possible light, complete with automotive memorabilia, vintage posters, and photographs, and in some cases even Hollywood-style sets.

The stories behind these remarkable buildings and the collections they contain reflect the unique personalities and passions of their owners. There’s the Jaguar collector who plans to move his house to make room for an enlarged garage; the Michigan native who hosts the industry’s top car designers at weekly gatherings on his farm outside Detroit; and a retired newspaper owner who drives his vintage Formula 1 Ferrari on a test track built next to his eight-car garage and three-plane hangar.

Loaded with anecdotes from each owner and illustrated with hundreds of full-color photographs, Ultimate Garages II is the ultimate insider’s tour of the distinctive homes of nearly every type of car: from concours-winning Duesenbergs and Pierce-Arrows, to classic hot rods and retired racers. You not only learn what these inspired car collectors have built, you learn why, what’s important to them, all certified car nuts.

Ultimate Garages™ II

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