

AS SEEN ON TV

Yes, This Is a Clunker, But My Other Car Is a Batmobile

By ETHAN TODRAS-WHITEHILL

THESE are cars, there are cars that turn heads, and then there is Scott Rice's car. Mr. Rice drives a 1982 Pontiac Trans Am — not exactly a classic — but he's made a few modifications. A devotee of the 80's television show "Knight Rider" starring David Hasselhoff, Mr. Rice has outfitted his car with a tan houndstooth interior; an 80's concept of a futuristic dashboard with abundant buttons, screens and green-yellow-red L.E.D.'s; and an oscillating red light display between the headlights. In other words, Mr. Rice's vehicle is a copy of the show's other star, the Knight Industries Two Thousand car, known as KITT.

To those who grew up watching the show in the 80's or the reruns in the 90's, KITT is a fond childhood memory, and Mr. Rice is used to adults acting like children in his car's presence. When he parks the car in a public place, as he did last month to eat at All American Burger in Massapequa, N.Y., he leaves the front red L.E.D.'s running.

Halfway through lunch, two middle-age women who had been admiring the car came up to him. "Excuse me," one woman said. "I just have to say, that car is so cool! 'Knight Rider,' right?"

Mr. Rice nodded slowly and smiled, his eyes hidden by wraparound Oakley sunglasses. "Down to the last detail," he said.

"Except you're much better looking than that David Hasselhoff," she added, and walked off giggling with her friend.

Mr. Rice, who works in the security field, put in more than 500 hours and \$30,000 to create his car, and while that may seem excessive, he is far from alone. Around the world, television and movie car enthusiasts are building and driving copies of their favorite "star cars." Some are content with a paint job and a little bodywork; others, like Mr. Rice, spend years perfecting every last detail, like the label on a dashboard button or the shape of a door handle. True aficionados gather online at Knightregistries.com or 1966batmobile.com to swap building tips and post pictures of their projects.

Last year, 31 KITT owners met in Dayton, Ohio, for the seventh annual Knight Nationals, which honors the most faithful "Knight Rider" copies. (Mr. Rice won the competition twice and has since retired.)

But star cars are not all high-tech mean machines; they include vehicles like the



Photographs by A. J. Mast for The New York Times ("Dukes of Hazzard")

Ecto 1 ambulance from "Ghostbusters" and the misshapen Munstermobile from "The Munsters." The three most copied vehicles are KITT, the General Lee from "The Dukes of Hazzard" and the Batmobile.

Nate Truman drives a '93 Camaro, but his other car is a Batmobile. Mr. Truman, 44, a graphic artist who lives in Los Angeles, describes himself as someone who "watched too much TV as a kid."

Mr. Truman got his "donor car" (the hobbyist term for the car to be converted), a Lincoln Continental, in 1996 and began locating parts: pieces of chrome, ashtrays with a certain shape, the right light bulbs. For the major components — notably the futuristic car body — he turned to a niche manufacturer in Canada. All told, Mr. Truman estimates he invested 10,000 hours and \$45,000 in the six years he was building his car.

When Mr. Truman goes out cruising in Los Angeles, he frequently gets a "woohoo" or thumbs-up from other drivers. By far, the most common question he gets is: "Is that the real car?" Mr. Truman explains that it isn't, but he says other Batmobile owners (there are about 20 in the United States, he says) often claim their cars are original. Maintaining that fiction, according to Mr. Truman, is the main reason Batmobile owners don't get together as KITT owners do.

Why do hobbyists (mostly men, that is) undertake these herculean endeavors? The most common explanation given in interviews was how much they loved the cars as children and how these projects made them feel young again. Several people also said they felt an affinity for the car's crime-fighting role. Mr. Rice, for instance, has



MEAN MACHINE Travis Bell, above, drives a replica General Lee from "The Dukes of Hazzard," a custom 1969 Dodge Charger.

worked as a police detective, a bodyguard and a director of security for a nightclub. His personal motto is "one man can make a difference," taken from "Knight Rider."

The popularity of these cars has given rise to a cottage industry of specialists catering to television car projects. The General Lee, the easiest of the Top 3 star cars to build, requires a 1969 Dodge Charger, a "Corvette flame" orange paint job, Vector wheels, a tan interior, a roll bar, a CB system, and a Confederate flag and "01" decals, which are the car's trademarks. With the release of the "Dukes of Hazzard" movie, interest in the cars has increased, said Travis Bell, a D.J. in Indianapolis who is the president of the North American General Lee

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Photographs by Maxine Hicks for The New York Times ("Knight Rider")



Photographs by A. J. Mast for The New York Times ("Dukes of Hazzard")



Sam Dean for The New York Times

STAR CARS Scott Rice, above, has won awards for his KITT from "Knight Rider," top far left. The dashboard was made by Don Colie, near left, who works on a 1982 Trans Am, the KITT starting point. Nate Truman, below, says he worked six years on his Batmobile.

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Marissa Roth for The New York Times

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Fan Club. Most of the General Lee's parts can be found at jakesgeneralstore.com and Buildgenerallee.com — one reason there are about 300 accurate copies around the world (including some in Australia, Britain and the Netherlands), Mr. Bell said.

For an authentic KITT, however, a lot of custom work is necessary. Mr. Rice notes that the exterior of the car on the show was just a souped-up Trans Am, and the interior of the car was a set. To get a working dashboard, he turned to Don Colie, the owner of Advanced Designs in Automotive Technology in Glade Hill, Va., who, according to Mr. Rice, is "a magician with fiberglass."

When Mr. Colie was 14, he won the science fair at his high school with a mock-up KITT

dashboard he built with red L.E.D.'s and a small TV. Today, he charges \$5,400 for a fully functional fiberglass version. He says his business began in 1997 when he posted a picture of his car on Knightregistries.com and got so many requests for parts that he eventually quit his day job as a prosthetics technician. Business prospects are looking good, he said, because "we're just now hitting the midlife-crisis period for guys who grew up watching 'Knight Rider.'"

Midlife-crisis car or not, Mr. Truman can't see himself growing out of his Batmobile. He said he was offered \$125,000 for the car but said no. "It's like an old friend," he said. "That's what these cars are: the modern versions of the trusty steed."