

# SIXTY YEARS OF BLOOD, SWEAT, & GEARS

You might not know Dean Jeffries' name, but you definitely know his work

BY BARRY STRINGFELLOW

**1.** Dean Jeffries learned pinstriping when he was stationed in Germany during the Korean War; here, he stripes the helmet James Dean would have worn in the Salinas race he was traveling to when he was killed in a car wreck near Cholame.

**2.** At his shop, Jeffries holds a sketch of his original concept for the Mantaray, one of his most famous creations. On the wall behind him hangs a poster for the movie *Honky Tonk Freeway*, with Jeffries driving a five-ton truck across a shattered freeway overpass.

**D**ean Jeffries had a problem. As a stunt driver for the 1981 film *Honky Tonk Freeway*, he had to figure out how to make a five-ton truck jump a gap of 110 feet, where a highway overpass once stood.

"If I came up short, I'd be dead. And if I made it, I was in for a helluva landing," Jeffries says, sitting in his shop on Cahuenga Boulevard in Los Angeles. He stands up, his back slightly bent from years of heavy use, and points to the picture of him in midflight. "I made it—by eight feet."

But then Jeffries had a bigger problem. "I'd rigged my seat with shock absorbers. But I put in too much air, and when I hit, I broke my back. Now I'm in a five-ton truck going over 100, and my legs don't work," he says with a laugh. "So I picked up my right leg with my hands, put it on the brake pedal, and pushed as hard as I could."

Once he stopped the truck, Jeffries headed to the hospital, where he lay ignored in the hallway for an hour. Fed up, he went back to his shop,



built a brace out of aluminum, padded it, bolted it on, and went back to work. "I was stunt coordinator," Jeffries says. "We still had one more to do that day. Wasn't no big deal."

Throughout his storied career as a custom-car builder, designer, stuntman, and stunt coordinator, Jeffries has been known as the guy who could make the unbelievable happen. He was commissioned to build an electric racecar, he designed

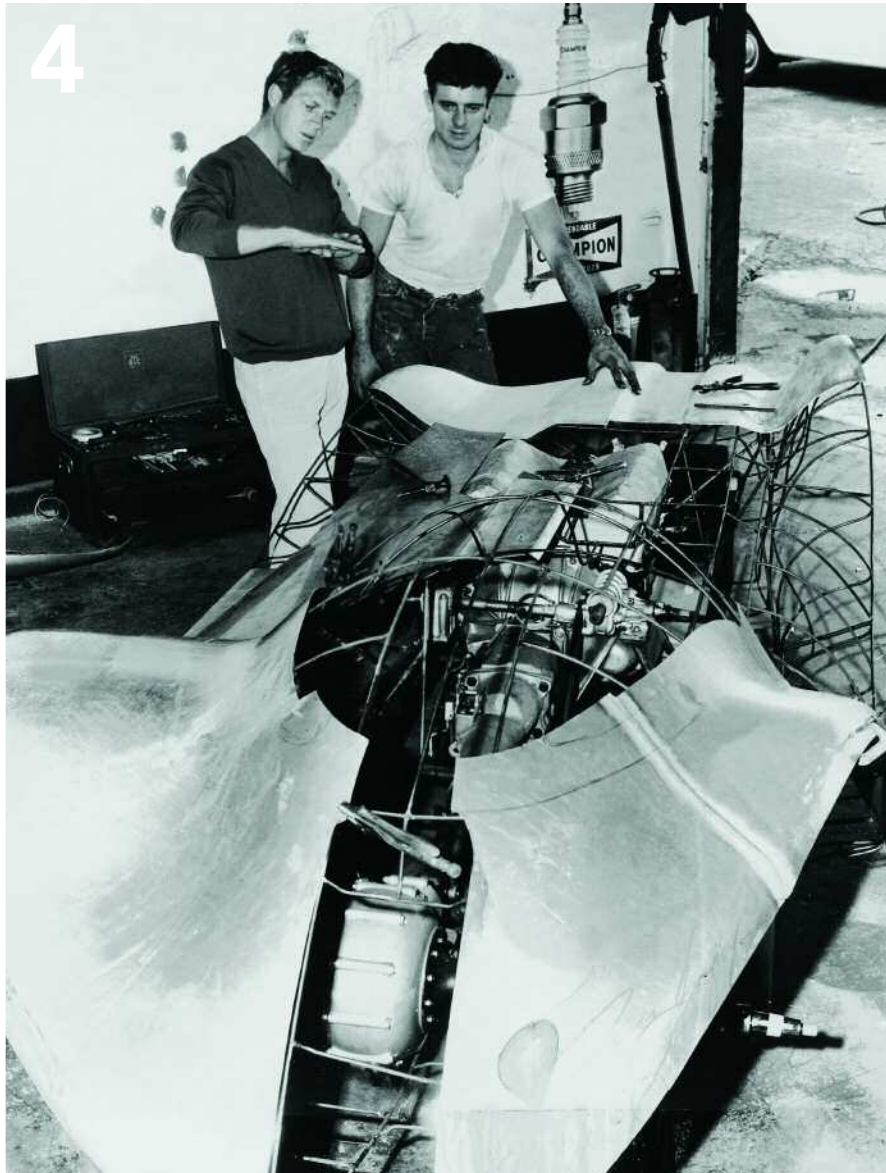
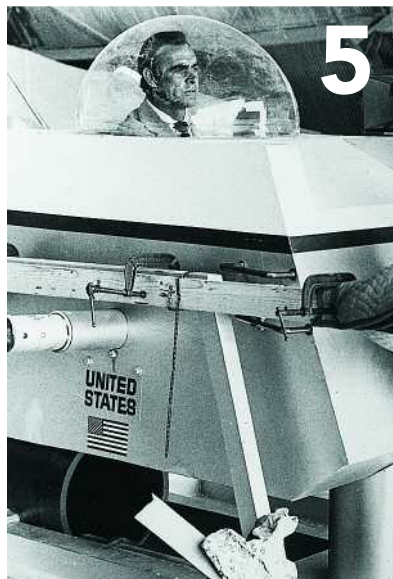
and manufactured dune buggies, and he became the go-to guy in Hollywood when something impossible had to be done with a vehicle. His extraordinary skills in all things automotive have made him one of the most accomplished people in the history of SoCal car culture, but his unassuming ways have also made him one of the most overlooked.

"Dean just went about quietly doing amazing work," says Leslie Kendall, curator at the Petersen Automotive Museum. "As a self-promoter, he stood in stark contrast to most people in his field. He's just more of an 'aw shucks' kind of guy."



DEAN JEFFRIES COLLECTION; OPPOSITE PAGE: ERIC VAN EYKE





DEAN JEFFRIES COLLECTION (5)

Despite his lack of an outside ego, Jeffries' influence on successive generations of customizers is undeniable. "Ever since I saw the Monkeemobile when I was a kid, Dean's work always stood out to me," says Keith Kaucher, owner of Kaucher Kustoms in Santa Monica. "When I was in college, a friend and I dropped by his shop. I was a little nervous because I'd heard he could be gruff. But he looked at my drawings and designs and was very encouraging. He treated us like he'd known us for a hundred years. The guy's a legend."

### IN THE BEGINNING

Jeffries was born in 1933 in Lynwood, California, which was still dominated by orchards and farms when he was growing up. His father was a mechanic and the source of Jeffries' love of cars—especially fast cars, like the ones they saw race at Gilmore Stadium, west of downtown L.A.

During the Korean War, Jeffries was stationed in Germany, where a local artist taught him pin-striping, the art of painting thin lines on an object to add subtle decorative flourishes. When Jeffries got back to Lynwood, he pinstriped everything he could get his hands on—coffee mugs, water skis, an occasional tricycle.

Hanging out with his buddy Kenny Howard (who would later gain fame as "Von Dutch"), Jeffries developed his own illustration style—a Disney meets Dali sensibility, with an undertone of irony. "Sometimes, at the end of the day, we'd have a few drinks and draw," he says. "You never knew what was going to come out."

Soon, working in a tiny garage in Lynwood, Jeffries established himself as a preeminent pinstriper. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, family garages throughout Southern California served as customizing workshops. Thanks largely to the exposure from TV, movies, and *Hot Rod* magazine, the region became the mecca of customizing. Business boomed for Jeffries.

Never one to rest on his laurels, Jeffries wasn't content. "I didn't want to do just one thing," he says. "So I kept my eyes open." Soon he was chopping, welding, and grinding his way to becoming one of the most skilled customizers in the business, along with celebrated SoCal craftsmen like Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, Gene Winfield, George Barris, and Boyd Coddington.

A self-taught artist, sculptor, architect, and engineer, Jeffries had a boundless imagination and a relentless drive to innovate. "Dean Jeffries conceived cars that had never been dreamt of and built them from the ground up," says Matt

Roth, manager of the Auto Club's archives and founding curator of the Petersen Automotive Museum. "Ninety-nine percent of the customizers couldn't do that."

Early on, Jeffries also developed a long and spirited partnership with auto racer A.J. Foyt. "The first time I painted his car, I did candy-apple red over white pearl—30 coats of it," Jeffries says. "It caught people's eye."

By 1967, Jeffries was so sought after that he painted 22 of the 33 cars in the Indy 500. "I did all of it—the priming, the sanding, the painting, and the lettering," he says. "I was doing two a day." Jeffries also worked in the pit for Foyt and Parnelli Jones. He learned about designing, engineering, and fabricating. "I'd just watch," he says. "Once you get that stuff in your brain, you don't forget it."

### HOLLYWOOD COMES CALLING

In 1959, Jeffries moved to his own shop on Sunset Boulevard. Gary Cooper and up-and-coming actor Steve McQueen frequented his shop. "I didn't care if they were celebrities or not," he says. "I think that's why some of them hung around."

"Gary Cooper asked me to customize his Chrysler for hunting. So I cut the roof off and added padding and roll bars so he could stand, real secure, and shoot whatever the hell it was he liked to shoot."

"Steve [McQueen] and I became good buddies. He was working on a TV show, *Wanted: Dead or Alive*, just up the road. He wasn't a big movie star then, but he was extremely nice, even after he made it big."

In 1963, Jeffries decided the next step was to enter his own car in the prestigious Grand National Roadster Show, known colloquially as the Oakland Roadster Show. "There were hot rod shows springing up everywhere, but Oakland was tops," he says. "You win that, and you get another step up that ladder. I knew I needed to make a splash, but I had no idea what to build. I was in Seattle, staring out at the ocean from my hotel room, trying to think of what to do. All of a sudden, this big manta ray swims by, and I started drawing."

Jeffries' ex-father-in-law had a 1939 Maserati Grand Prix sitting in his backyard "with leaves all over it and grass growing in it," Jeffries says. So Jeffries stripped it to the chassis, built a frame with quarter-inch rod, and seamlessly shaped 86 pieces of aluminum over it into baroque, asymmetrical curves that simulated a swimming manta ray.

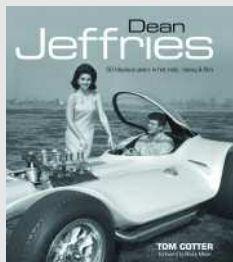
**3.** An actor from *Bikini Beach* at the controls of the Mantaray.

**4.** Steve McQueen and Jeffries discuss the Mantaray's design.

**5.** Sean Connery peers out from the cockpit of the moon buggy, which appeared in the James Bond film *Diamonds Are Forever*.

**6.** Close-up of the Black Beauty, a modified 1966 Chrysler Imperial that Jeffries constructed for *The Green Hornet* TV series.

**7.** The Kyote I, which was used in several of *The Monkees* TV programs, with the four Monkees (Micky Dolenz, Michael Nesmith, Davy Jones, and Peter Tork).



*Dean Jeffries: 50 Fabulous Years in Hot Rods, Racing & Film*, by Tom Cotter, 2009, MBI Publishing Co., Minneapolis, Minnesota.





**8.** As a stunt driver, Jeffries jumped a freeway overpass for the movie *Honky Tonk Freeway*, breaking his back in the process.

**9.** One of Jeffries' favorite vehicles, the Landmaster, appeared in the 1977 sci-fi movie *Damnation Alley*.

**10.** Jeffries completed Monkeemobile No. 1 in just 10 days; it's a modified 1966 Pontiac GTO convertible.

He topped the car with a futuristic bubble and dropped in a 289 Ford V8 engine. The Mantaray won the Oakland Roadster Show in 1964, and in May of that year, *Hot Rod* magazine put it on the cover—the ultimate coronation for a customizer.

"If there was ever a Jeffries car I'd want for the museum, it would be the Mantaray," says the Petersen's Kendall. "It's a sculpture even without the body panels."

A movie producer saw the Mantaray on the Steve Allen TV show and hired Jeffries for the film *Bikini Beach*. "It was a corny movie," Jeffries says, "but it was good money. I really wanted to break into movies—not to be a star or nothing—but because that's where the money was."

Over the next two decades, Jeffries created some of the most famous vehicles in TV and movie history: the Black Beauty for *The Green Hornet* TV series, the Monkeemobile, the leviathan Landmaster for *Damnation Alley*, and the moon buggy for the James Bond film *Diamonds Are Forever*, to name just a few.

Jeffries' stunt career also started on *Bikini Beach*. "Frankie [Avalon] couldn't drive a stick, and he sure as hell wasn't going to learn on the Mantaray," Jeffries says with paternal concern. Eventually, Jeffries started doing regular stunt work.

These days, Jeffries spends five days a week in his shop, fastidiously restoring his prized Ford GT40 roadster. "I was in Detroit in 1965 with Foyt doing wind-tunnel testing when I saw it in a back room. I told Jack Passino, head honcho of Ford Racing at the time, that I'd like to buy it. He said, 'I think we're going to crunch it. You can have it.'"

"My life's been bitchin'," Jeffries says, surveying his GT40. "When I started in Lynwood, things were tough. I've been very lucky. I didn't plan nothin'. I just took things day by day. There's been some bad times, but that's just life, you know? Now I wake up every morning happy that I woke up. I love what I do, and I'm thankful for every day I get to do it." **W**

*Barry Stringfellow is a regular Westways contributor. His last article was "Gone Fishing," in June 2010.*