



CAR CRAZY

This page: An East Side Hot Rod Club classic car on display at Windward Mall. The mall will host the club again on June 25, Aug. 20 and Nov. 19. Opposite: Track coordinator Michael Kitchens waves the checked flag at Kalaeloa Raceway Park, where a new breed of racers kick up the dust.



WE MAY HATE TO COMMUTE IN HONOLULU, BUT WE LOVE OUR CARS. MEET SOME OF THE EVERYDAY HONOLULUANS WHO RACE, COLLECT AND ADORE THEIR AUTOMOBILES.

by Howard Dashefsky  *Photos by Olivier Koning*

W

WHAT DOES YOUR CAR MEAN TO YOU? Is it simply a machine to get you from point A to point B? ¶ Or is it something you cherish? Or perhaps something to demolish? ¶ As of Dec. 31, 2010 there were just over 700,000 registered cars and trucks on the island of O‘ahu alone. While it might seem like all of them are in front of you during your daily commute, there are, in fact, considerably more registered vehicles in the City and County of Honolulu than there are licensed drivers to operate them. ¶ “That’s simply because people love and have always been crazy for their cars,” says car enthusiast George Nitta, owner of Nitta’s Auto Repair in Kapālama. “Cars are like a part of the family. Just because they get old, you’re not going to kick them out of the house.”



Victor Weisberger and his life-long love. “There’s nothing like getting behind the wheel of this car. Heads turn, people with cell phone cameras hang out windows. It’s fantastic!”

Cars have been at the center of Nitta’s life for the better part of 50 years, from fixing and racing them, to sharing his knowledge of cars through his radio show, and a continuing education course in the 1990s at the University of Hawai‘i, called Practical Auto.

He says there are as many different ways to love a car as there are makes and models.

“You have the extreme owners who pour thousands and thousands of dollars into their cars just to make them look good, and spend nothing on their wives or their families,” says Nitta. “And then there are those who just tinker, or who are interested in racing, or just want to get a car running well enough so they can take out it on the track and destroy it.”

Here are the stories of just a few of the people in Honolulu who have gone a little car crazy.

► The Old Man and the T

Americans have enjoyed a passionate romance with the automobile since Henry Ford began mass-producing the first Model T in 1908. For Kailua’s Victor Weisberger, it’s a love affair that has withstood the test of time. He owns, and still drives, the 1914 Model T he purchased more than a half-century ago.

“I bought it when I was 19 and it has lasted far longer than any job, relationship or marriage I’ve ever had,” says Weisberger. “It’s a great toy. It keeps me young and takes



From parking lot to raceway. One Sunday each month drivers can test the limits of their cars, and themselves, at Aloha Stadium.

me back to the early days of motorized transportation when the transition was being made from the horse and wagon.”

For the past 30 years, Weisberger has served as news editor for the Antique Automobile Club of America’s Aloha Region. His son, Fred, is president. “We’ve been around for about 35 years now as a local club and have about 40 fairly active members,” says Fred. “The club is designed for any car at least 25 years old. When the national club was started back in the mid 1930s, that would have been a very old car from about 1910, but now it can be cars from the 1980s.”

The younger Weisberger describes himself as the consummate tinkerer. With five antique cars parked around his house right now, there’s never a shortage of work.

“You have to always tinker just to keep them going,” says Fred Weisberger. “Old cars are not very reliable.”

Like most car collectors, Fred has a life that extends beyond the garage. This collector of history also teaches history at Le Jardin Academy.

“I talk about the cars where appropriate,” he says. “Most of the kids are probably sick of it, but they enjoy hearing about my cars. I’ve even brought some to school and we’ve had car rides. So it’s been a great learning experience and history lesson for the kids.”

Married with two children of his own, Fred admits that splitting time between his real life loves and his mechanical babies is a delicate balancing act.

“It’s always a struggle, but I’m lucky that my wife is super supportive,” he says. “She enjoys traveling to car events, and we’ve met great people, including Jay Leno and other famous race car drivers. And I think I’ve

managed to stay not in the doghouse, but in the good house, because I’ve made money on every car I’ve ever bought except for one I sold to a friend.”

► You Only Hurt the Cars You Love

While the Antique Automobile Club strives to preserve cars, some folks out at Kalaeloa Raceway Park seem to get a kick out of destroying them on the track.

“We’ve been working for the past three years to bring racing back to this part of O’ahu after Hawai’i Raceway Park shut down in April 2006,” says track coordinator Michael Kitchens. “It’s been a huge effort trying to get the park open, schedule events

can do everything we used to do at the park.”

A funny thing happened to this self-described “asphalt guy” and many others who yearn for the days of hard surfaces and drag racing. Because they’ve been forced to adapt, they’ve turned into an entirely new breed of racing enthusiasts.

“One of the more popular events is something we call the ‘Hula Cross,’ which is an extreme off-road rally,” says Kitchens. “It’s one of the most amazing, exciting things I’ve ever seen. A mixture of stock-car racing, demolition derby and road racing. It is so visceral and visual. Watching them go through the mud pit and jumping four feet off the ground and doing the table tops in these off-the-shelf cars, it’s awesome.”

Kitchens says most of the cars competing in the Hula Cross are junkyard specials purchased for \$500 or less. If you don’t have a beater of your own, Kalaeloa Raceway Park just might have one for you.

“We were thinking of creative ways to get new people out here because so few people have ever done this before,” he says. “Since we already had access to some beaters, we decided to buy them, prep them and make them available at an affordable price. As far as I know, there’s nowhere else in Hawai’i where you can rent a racecar and hit the track, and that’s what we’re doing. And the growing number of people who come out

“WATCHING THEM GO THROUGH THE MUD PIT AND JUMPING FOUR FEET OFF THE GROUND AND DOING THE TABLE TOPS IN THESE OFF-THE-SHELF CARS, IT’S AWESOME.”

and get people racing again with the support of the SCCA [Sports Car Club of America].”

While the sounds of roaring engines are once again filling the air at Kalaeloa, so is the dust. Due to a lack of funds, all events at Kalaeloa these days are on dirt.

“We had no choice, because dirt is cheap and dirt is easy,” says Kitchens. “Everyone has dirt they’re trying to give away. So the focus for us is on getting asphalt so that we

are loving it.”

You need to sign a liability waiver if you plan to race, but Kitchens says it’s actually extremely safe because the speeds are relatively low.

► Suburban Speed Demons!

For drivers looking to satisfy their need for speed, the lower parking lot of Aloha Stadium is fast becoming the perfect gather-

Lynn Hartnett: Mild mannered special-ed teacher by weekday, revved up racer come Sunday. "It's the ultimate feeling of power and control. I love it."



Join the Club

SSCA races at Aloha Stadium

Racing information/schedule of events,
sccahawaii.org

Kalaeloa Raceway

kalaeloaracewaypark.com
Michael Kitchens, track coordinator/public relations, 782-7432

Aloha Mustang and Shelby Club of Hawai'i, alohamustang.com

Antique Car Club of America, Aloha Region, oldride.com/clubs/764289648.html

Additional Car Clubs, News and Events, georgenitta.com/carclubnews.htm. There you'll find contact info for 24 different car clubs, from Acuras to Corvettes to Nissans and more, plus racing information.

ing place every fourth Sunday. Jennifer Lee oversees the Hawai'i solo-racing program, which is also supported by the SCCA.

Stadium officials began allowing racers a chance to use the parking lot in 2006. Lee and her husband, both engineers by profession, are among those who race. But she says many non-car enthusiasts also enjoy the opportunity to compete. While some drivers show up with performance cars, many bring ordinary cars: Mazda Miatas, Chevy Impalas, even econoboxes such as the Honda Fit. It's the drivers who make the difference, getting the most out of whatever they drive as they whip around the cones.

"We offer an ever-changing obstacle course with straight-aways, turnarounds, switchbacks and slaloms," says Lee. "You get four runs and try to clock the fastest time against other similar cars in your class."

"We have a wide variety from all over the place," says Lee. "We have the kids who just want to go fast, the parents who want their teens to learn their own limits and the lim-



Fred Weisberger, the tireless tinkerer. "There's never a shortage of things to work on. Just a shortage of time."

its of the car, and we have your typical moms and dads who heard about us and wanted to check us out for themselves."

Lynn Hartnett is one of those typical

moms. Although her children are grown and her carpool days are over, the special-education teacher at Salt Lake Elementary yearns to put the pedal to the metal.

"With teaching, there's so much stress and so many issues you can't resolve," says Hartnett. "With racing, you get scared and nervous, but you also overcome it. When I'm racing on the course I feel like I can conquer the world. It's an absolutely amazing release."

Hartnett, who now races in a Mini Cooper, first hit the Aloha Stadium course in a faithful yellow VW Beetle. She says learning to navigate the track has made her a better driver out on the road.

"There are a lot of bad drivers out there," said Hartnett. "Now I can avoid them. I have better instincts, better peripheral vision. More people need to get out there and learn to drive."

► All in the Family

While not all drivers want to race their cars or devote time and money to maintaining rolling antiques, many feel a fan's devotion to particular makes and models, and share a common bond with others who appreciate their four-wheeled wonders.

From Acura to Volvo devotees, car clubs in Hawai'i run the gamut, with the Aloha Mustang and Shelby Club being one of the oldest and largest.

"There are a lot of people who love their cars no matter what they drive," says Mustang owner Don Johnston. "People who join clubs have a passion for their wheels that goes beyond just driving. The car is the common denominator that brings you to the club. The friendships keep you there and allow you to be part of a family."

Every year, the Mustang "family" organizes or takes part in dozens of events ranging from parades and picnics to major fundraisers for local charities. But Johnston says it all boils down to sharing the love for what he and other Mustang owners believe is the best car ever built.

"It's the ultimate car. It combines affordability, sportiness and unique styling that allows a customer to consider it a daily driver for the family, as well as a true performance car."

Johnston also says the love affair between driver and car is simple to explain.

"Cars equal independence. They have given us the freedom to move since the first cars rolled off the line."

This shared appreciation transcends

the devotion some people feel to a particular make or model. Despite the fact most of his antique car-club members are now in their 60s and 70s, Fred Weisberger says they can relate to all car enthusiasts, even to the young, fast and furious racers of today, who drive around in hopped-up and tricked-out rides.

"There are so many different venues for people to find their niche, and we have great respect for all of it because we were teens too once upon a time," says Weisberger. "We all have the same general illness—a love of cars. They're just going with what is out there today, and if you really open your eyes and look at it, the work they do is just phenomenal."

Whether a beauty or a beater, it's easy to

understand why a true enthusiast's car is his or her baby, regardless of its age.

"When you jump into the seat of a Model T, you're taking a drive back in time," says Weisberger. "You've gone back 80 years, which is the Stone Age for cars, in terms of technology, and it's quite an experience."

"All the new cars today look like big, rolling eggs to me," says Nitta. "The '50s and '60s, now *those* were cars. There are no words for an old car. It's like a beautiful woman. You see it coming from a mile away, and it just stops you in your tracks." **PAU**

Authors note: Howard "Dash" Dashefsky is a former sports car and convertible owner who now drives a standard SUV to carry his two daughters, surfboards, golf clubs and bicycles.



Car enthusiast Don Johnston proclaims, "The Mustang is the best car ever built. Period!"