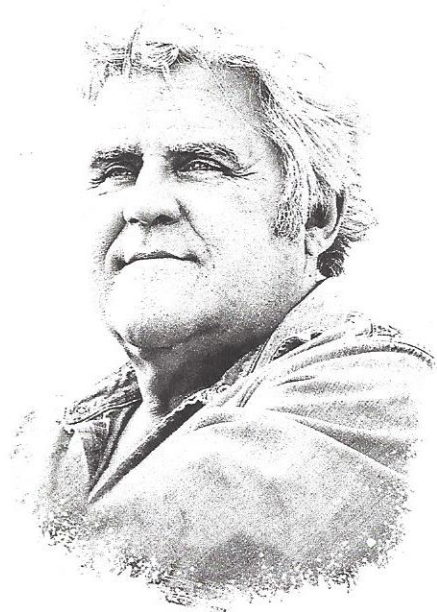




JAY LENO

The Comedian



Jay Leno hosted *The Tonight Show* from 1992 to 2014 and remains on the comic circuit. His personal car collection, which he shares with enthusiasts on his TV show, *Jay Leno's Garage*, includes everything from obscure exotics to early steam cars.

WE ALL GET CAUGHT UP IN THE WHOLE “classic car thing.” It’s all about Duesenbergs and Bugattis and Enzos and Lamborghinis, the high-end stuff. But I’ve always liked any type of vehicle that is interesting, and the real trick today is to spot a collectible car before anybody else does.

A good example is the 1966 Oldsmobile Toronado. It was the first front-drive American-made car since the Cords of the 1930s, and it came out at a time when the Lancia Flaminia had 152 horsepower and the Italians said you couldn’t put more than that through the front wheels because it would be unstable and have torque steer and fly off the road. Yet here was the Toronado, with a 425-cubic-inch V-8 making 385 horsepower, and it was beautiful. Ten years ago, if you saw them on the street they looked like dinosaurs sticking out of the tar pits. The suspension was collapsed, the chrome was pitted, everything was dented and smashed, and they weren’t particularly valuable cars.

I bought mine for \$800, and after we restored it and converted it to rear-drive so we could put 1,000 horsepower in it (while keeping it looking as stock as possible), we brought it to the SEMA show in Las Vegas. Then I started to get angry letters and comments from people: “You know, I used to be able to buy Toronados for \$1,000, but since you rebuilt yours and there are a lot of stories about it, now they’re \$3,500.” Initially that was maybe a bad thing, but now it’s a good thing, because it’s causing more Toronados to be saved.

Your first criteria for a classic should be: Is it interesting? It should be fun to drive, it should be technically exciting, and it should have a design that is appealing. To me, the all-time greatest example of a car waiting to be discovered is the Chevrolet Corvair. I see them for sale on the web for anywhere from \$900 to maybe \$13,500 for the best one in the world. It was revolutionary, and when Yenko did his Stinger, it had up to 240 horsepower and a modified suspension, actually beating Porsche in the 1967 SCCA D Production championship. To this day, when I drive mine around, people say, “What kind

of car is that?” I tell them it’s a Chevy and they don’t believe me!

It’s got all the elements, and a fascinating story, too. The car was not considered a success at the time because they only sold 1.8 million of them. Today, if you sell 1.8 million of anything they make you the president of the company. But back then, with the Mustang going crazy and the Camaro coming, the Corvair was lagging after 1966 so they killed it in 1969. Of course, Ralph Nader didn’t help the situation, either.

If you’re a reasonably astute car person and you like something, chances are other reasonably astute car people will like it, too. I believe the first-generation Mazda Miata will be the ’65 Mustang of the next 10 or 15 years, because if you’re a young person and you want something cool, here’s a cheap car with virtually no electronics, a twin-cam engine, a five-speed stick, and disc brakes.

Another example is the first-generation Taurus SHO, a breakthrough car for Ford. It was aerodynamic and it had a five-speed transmission, front-drive, and an overhead-cam Yamaha V-6. It was truly a European-American-Japanese collaboration, and it’s one of the most exciting cars of the late 1980s. As we get more and more into electric vehicles, the first-gen Prius (first-year designs are often the best) now looks like a cute little car you can get around town in—the Renault Dauphine of hybrids. It was the first application of Toyota’s hybrid technology, and in the future, it will be seen as interesting in the same way that old Macintosh computers are now considered collectible.

Scoff if you want, but it only takes a while for people to look at cars in a new way. I have a 1951 Hudson Hornet that I bought in 1996 from the original owner’s widow. Their kids, who are now in their 70s, told me they were embarrassed to be taken to high school by their dad. They’d tell him to drop them at the corner because he had such an old-fashioned-looking car. It just takes time for shapes to come around again. The idea is to spot it first, before everyone else jumps on it. // editor@hagerty.com