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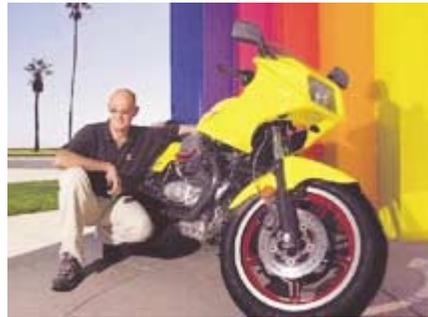
Car show gets in gear for festival

10/8/02

By [CHARLOTTE BOECHLER](#)

NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

Matthew Venable picked up plenty of fashion tips when he attended a gay auto show in San Luis Obispo earlier this year.



"They had two cars dressed up in tuxes!" he noted with a chuckle. "You know, gay people are usually very fashionable."

But that doesn't mean he'll hang pink tassels from his rear-view mirror or paint a rainbow on his hood for the second annual Queer Gearhead Invasion from 11 a. m. to 10 p. m. Saturday at the Santa Barbara Gay Pride Festival in De la Guerra Plaza.

Mr. Venable's 1960 Lincoln Continental already turns enough heads when it drives down the road au naturel.

"It takes a city block to turn it around," joked the Santa Maria truck driver, 38. "I get next to a Toyota or Geo and my front fender is as long as the whole Geo."

Strangers often give a thumbs up or wave at the "land yacht" when he sails down the street with buddies. It

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seats six, comfortably: "My friend calls the back seat
Ôliving-room seating.Ê"

The Mark V wasn't always as see-worthy.

"It had been parked in the garage since 1975," said Mr. Venable. "The front fender was smashed and the windshield was popped out."

He first heard about the car in 1990 after spotting its twin -- used for parts -- in an Orcutt field. Mr. Venable, a demolition derby competitor, approached the owner hoping to buy the parts car for racing, but was turned down -- until three years later when the owner needed room in the garage for a new station wagon and gave him a deal on both Marks.

"It now looks very similar to the model that rolled out of the factory."

Mr. Venable replaced the damaged parts, added new leather seats and shag carpet, replated the chrome and repainted the car its original color, mint green. "I'm a perfectionist. If a certain type of screw came out of a place, I want the same kind of screw back in that place."

Sounds funny coming from a guy used to smashing up or parting out one of his fleet of 30 old derby cars. The Lincoln was his first classic car restoration. It cost him \$10,000 and he did most of the work himself.

"I've been playing with mechanical things since I was 6. I would take apart every toy I had," said Mr. Venable. "I progressed to lawn mowers. The ones I would get were broken; then I'd make them work again. At 12, my dad bought me a truck that I fixed up and sold. It was a 1971 Datsun."

He's now restoring a 1963 Mercury Monterey that he found through a trade paper in Fremont.

"The reason I bought it was it is a four-speed car, which is very rare," he said. "I don't like cars that everybody has, Mustangs, '55 Chevys, Camaros."

"When I drive my car, everybody looks at it like, ÔWhat's that?' " he added. "I get a kick out of it."

That might be the reaction to some of the other cars

and motorcycles at the Queer Gearhead Invasion -- even if they aren't decked out in rainbow dice and pink-triangle bumper stickers.

"It's not about people who travel gay. It's about gay people who travel," said Charles Rice, executive director of festival host Gay Santa Barbara. "I'm hoping we'll see a representative bit of iron through the ages."

That could include new Ferraris and classic Caddys. Last year, said Mr. Rice, 14 "dykes on bikes" came out.

"The idea of this is to show people that so much of the beauty in the world they see, not just art and sculptures, is coming from a gay artist," he said. "Anything from furniture to automobiles or motorcycles."

The Invasion is open to participants of all sexual orientations and pays tribute to the late Frank Hershey, an auto designer known for the 1955 Ford Thunderbird who, earlier in his career, put fins on cars, including the 1948 Cadillac. His boss, said Mr. Rice, thought the fins hideous and ordered them removed. But the artist refused.

"You talk about flamboyant designs! Think about what some of the cars looked like in the '50s. They were like rocket ships with strings of lights," said Mr. Rice. "It came from the creative mind of a gay man."

A 1948 forest-green Cadillac from Santa Barbara is expected to touch down at the event.

"I see it and think back to the old 'Godfather' movies," he said. "You can picture some of the actors riding around with machine guns in it."

Mr. Rice, a professed "queer gearhead" who owned a motorcycle shop in Santa Barbara for 20 years, will display his 1990 Rennsport Guzzi. The street bike -- a Moto Guzzi with Mr. Rice's custom parts -- has a 1,100 cc engine and can be purchased for \$10,000. It's painted "stealth yellow."

"It must be invisible to police," chuckled Mr. Rice. "I haven't gotten a ticket on it for many, many years."

The organizer expects the auto and bike show to draw members of Southern California's Great Autos of Yesteryear (GAY) and Northern California's Freewheelers Car Club. The majority of gay participants will probably be from outside of Santa Barbara.

"The whole point of doing a festival like this is to celebrate our lives and live freely, but the fact is that many people still live in fear. If someone is coming from Los Angeles, they're not as likely to have to worry about some wacko, hate-filled person" targeting him or her after the event, he said. "We still have people burned to death and beaten to death, even in our own back yard."

Mr. Venable admits he still faces prejudices -- and not just from those who are straight. Many gay people, he said, are surprised to learn he's a gearhead.

"I'm pretty much a minority in the gay community," he said. "Most gay people are not mechanics, not into cars."

The stereotypes don't stop with his being gay.

"People always think of you as a grease monkey, toothless, dirty feet when you're working demolition derbies," he said. "Most people are very blue-collared people who do it. Most of them are educated and go to the dentist or doctor."

YOU'LL HAVE A GAY OLD TIME

The second annual Queer Gearhead Invasion, a car and motorcycle show, cruises into town 11 a. m. to 10 p. m. Saturday at the Santa Barbara Gay Pride Festival in De la Guerra Plaza. Other highlights of the free Gay Pride Festival include:

- * 11 a. m. Antara & Delilah, contemporary folk singers, kick off the live music
- * 2 to 3 p. m. Literary Salon featuring poets and authors, including Patricia Nell Warren, author of "The Front Runner" (Wildcat Press, 1995)
- * 7 p. m. D. J. and dancing

Other festival-related events:

* Official Kickoff Party -- 10 p. m. Wednesday at Q's Sushi A Go Go, 409 State St. Live music, dancing. Cover charge.

* National Coming OUT Day Rally -- 5 p. m. to 6:30 p. m. Friday at Casa de la Guerra, 9 E. De la Guerra St.

* Gay Identity Art Show -- 6:30 p. m. Friday at Caruso Woods Fine Art, 131 E. De la Guerra St. Free admission, no-host bar.

* Pre-Pride Party -- 9 p. m. Friday at Hades, 235 W. Montecito St. Music, dancing. Cover charge.

* Official Post Pride Bash -- 10 p. m. Saturday at Velvet Jones, 423 State St. Music, dancing. Cover charge.

COME OUT

Wanna show off your body? Charles Rice, executive director of Gay Santa Barbara, said space is still available for cars and motorcycles at the Queer Gearhead Invasion. Please call him at 962-1403 or visit the Web site at www.gaysanta-barbara.org for more information.