

# LA story

**We join American photojournalist Richard Truesdell and a fleet of classic American muscle cars on a tour of some of LA's most important muscle car heritage sites**

**W**HILST many muscle car owners in the US fantasise about taking part in one of the many organised cross-county tours, for most, it's simply not practical, for a number of reasons. First, there's the time commitment necessary, often a week or more away from work. Then there's the prospect of putting hundreds, if not thousands of miles, on a car that over the past several years, has escalated dramatically in value.

For these reasons we organised our first informal Musclegar Tour, a day-long trip that gathered six classic muscle cars and their owners, driving from sunrise-to-sundown, visiting iconic locations from Southern California's hot rod past. In the process, we reinforced the simple fact that these cars were made to be driven and along more than 120 miles, generated incalculable smiles and thumbs-up, wherever we went.

### **The Genesis**

THE idea of the Musclegar Tour started with the idea of seeing if I could design a route that could be driven in a day, stopping along the way at as many as a half-dozen locations



that were directly related to Southern California's muscle car heritage.

With the help of muscle car enthusiast and owner Al Nocita, a long-time resident of Southern California (and owner of a half-dozen prime muscle cars himself) we mapped out a route starting in his hometown of Monrovia for breakfast, ending up at



Irwindale Speedway where he treated all of the participants to an evening of exciting circle track racing from his luxury box at Southern California's latest speedway and drag strip.

After Al and I had determined the general route, I planned it out in detail, using a combination of vintage road maps (see sidebar) and their contemporary equivalent online, [www.mapquest.com](http://www.mapquest.com). Together a route of 120 miles was finalised.

Next came the selection of the muscle cars; we wanted to make sure that we had a really photogenic group of cars for the tour, so we made sure there was at least one car each from AMC, Ford, GM and Mopar. I think you'll agree, we succeeded in assembling a killer collection of vintage Detroit iron ... not a rice burner to be found!

Invitations went out to a group of more than a dozen owners and the cars that ran the entire tour are a great cross section of muscle car history. They include everything from a small block '70 AAR 'Cuda, two rare selections, the '68 Cougar XR-7G and the '69 AMC SC/Rambler, and a '71 454 Chevelle ragtop. Along the way we picked up two additional cars: the '67 Cougar and the '73 AMC Javelin/AMX. On a special Saturday in October, these cars and their lucky owners

**Words and photography: Richard Truesdell**



**ABOVE:** HITTIN' THE STREETS IN A '71 CHEVELLE, TOP DOWN, RAYBANS ON AND PEDAL TO THE METAL, THE PERFECT WAY TO EXPLORE LA!  
**ABOVE RIGHT:** THE NHRA MUSEUM, POMONA  
**LEFT:** GARY MAIBE, ART AND WANDA HOPKINS, LYNN & GLORIA BROKAW, KENN FUNK AND KEITH HAYES WERE OUR WILLING MUSCLE CAR TOURISTS  
**RIGHT:** '68 COUGAR OUTSIDE BLAIR'S SPEED SHOP



covered more than 900 miles without even a single incidence of overheating.

**Breakfast - Le Roy's Highland Restaurant, Monrovia (8:30 - 9:45)**

MEETING just after sunrise at Le Roy's Highland Restaurant, brought the entire group together for the first time and the informal gathering of a half dozen muscle cars in the parking lot drew an immediate crowd even though it's not uncommon for car junkies to gather here.

Introductions were made, Gary Maibe would be driving his '67 Cougar, his friend Art and Wanda Hopkins would be driving their '68 Cougar, Lynn and Gloria Brokaw would be behind the wheel of their '69

SC/Rambler, Kenn Funk would handle the driving chores for his '70 'Cuda while 20-year-old Keith Hayes would be wheeling Mike Scott's '71 Chevelle through the notorious LA potholes.

Over a hearty breakfast, with equally scintillating car talk, the day's itinerary was handed out, which included copies of maps circa 1964 and 1970. Everyone talked about how times had changed and then headed out to the parking lot, noticing the throng that had surrounded the cars. After taking some photos of the group, we headed a few miles west to Blair's Speed Shop in Pasadena.

**First Stop - Blair's Speed Shop, Pasadena (10:00 - 11:00)**

SEVEN miles was all it took to reach the first stop, Blair's Speed Shop in Pasadena. If ever there was an iconic Southern California speed shop, Blair's, on Route 66, would be it. More than any stop on the tour, it's an authentic step back in time, looking much as it did in the Sixties.

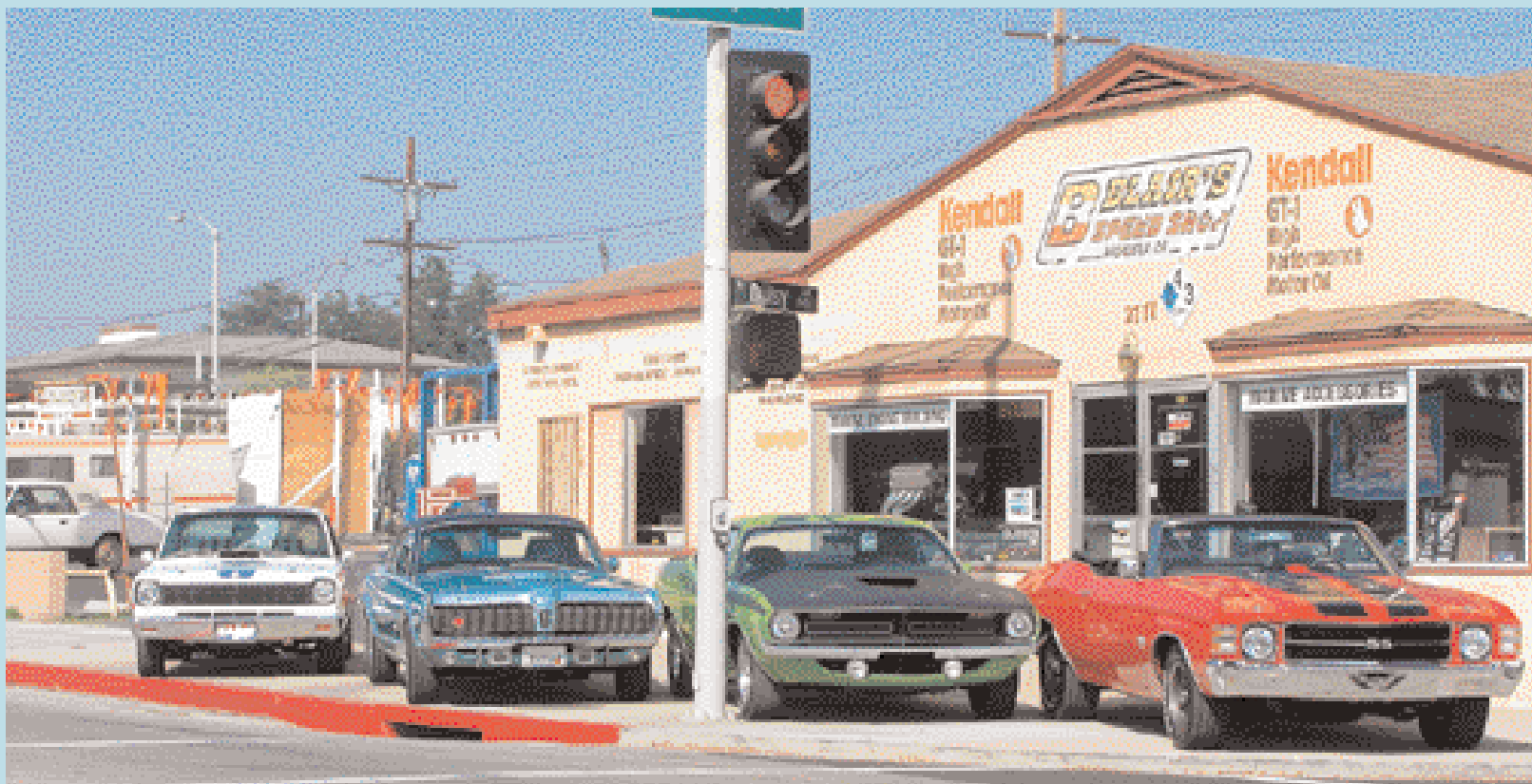
All the participants were given a tour by current owner Phil Lukens, including the catcombs behind the counter areas which included the fully-equipped machine shop. One could only imagine how many horse-



**Detour**

**1967 Mercury Cougar**

- Length: 190.3 inches**
- Width: 73.6 inches**
- Height: 54.6 inches**
- Wheelbase: 111.0 inches**
- Weight: 3175 pounds**
- Displacement: 289 cubic inches**
- Horsepower: 225 horsepower (gross)**
- Transmission: 3-speed automatic**



power were 'liberated' over the years at the hands of skilled mechanics, and how many seconds were shaved off the ETs of the cars that emerged from this hot rod Mecca.

**Second Stop - Moon Equipment, Santa Fe Springs (11:30 - 12:15)**

IS there a better known trademark of the muscle car era than a set of Mooneyes? Probably not. So it's no surprise that we made the Moon Equipment HQ in Santa Fe Springs as our second stop, about 25 miles south on the San Gabriel Freeway (I-605) from Blair's. There the Moon staff greeted everyone and our group was given a tour of their facilities.

Within one of the garages, we were treated to a classic Moon-equipped slingshot dragster. The Moon showroom is fully equipped,



culture landmark, and has been the location for countless magazine and advertising shoots. We were now running a bit behind schedule (always figure that as the tour moves forward, delays will be inevitable so factor in additional time for each connecting leg).

Famous for both their food and their car-friendly hospitality, Frisco's general manager Jesse Acosta welcomed our group with open arms even though they were packed for the lunchtime rush. With their famed poodle-skirted waitresses on roller skates, it was the perfect place to take a break. Each Wednesday night for years Frisco's has hosted their own cruise night and you're encouraged to bring your own set of pre-'73 wheels. It was at Frisco's that we picked up a last member for our caravan, Jack Baugher, who joined us with his one-owner '73 Javelin/AMX with its rare Pierre Cardin interior trim.

not only with a wide selection of speed parts, but an extensive book store, with editions relating to hot rodding's history that are unavailable almost anywhere else. These include rare magazines imported from Japan where Mooneyes has an affiliate.

**Third Stop - Frisco's Drive-In, Downey (12:30 - 1:30)**

LESS than five miles away we found the logical place to schedule our lunch stop. While it only re-creates the Fifties and Sixties, Frisco's in Downey is a well-known local car



**1970 Plymouth AAR 'Cuda**

**Length:** 186.7 inches

**Width:** 74.9 inches

**Height:** 50.9 inches

**Wheelbase:** 108.0 inches

**Weight:** 3655 pounds

**Displacement:** 340 cubic inches

**Horsepower:** 290 horsepower (gross)

**Transmission:** 4-speed manual



## Detour



### 1968 Mercury Cougar XR7-G

**Length:** 190.3 inches

**Width:** 73.6 inches

**Height:** 54.6 inches

**Wheelbase:** 111.0 inches

**Weight:** 3305 pounds

**Displacement:** 390 cubic inches

**Horsepower:** 325 horsepower (gross)

**Transmission:** 3-speed automatic



**ABOVE LEFT:** WHAT A LINE-UP! 1969 AMC SC/RAMBLER, 1968 MERCURY COUGAR XR7-G, 1970 PLYMOUTH AAR 'CUDA, 1971 CHEVROLET CHEVELLE

**FAR LEFT:** ORIGINAL FIFTIES CHRYSLER HEMI ENGINE AT BLAIRS, WHAT A BEAUT!

**LEFT:** HOW'S THIS FOR A WAGON? TRICK WHEELS AND GORGEOUS PAINT MAKE THIS '63 FORD COUNTRY SQUIRE THE CENTRE OF ATTENTION AT MOON'S



### Fourth Stop - Old Irwindale Speedway Site, Irwindale (2:00 - 2:30)

SOUTH Motor Avenue in Irwindale (population 1446), currently the site of the regional Miller Brewing Plant, was the next stop on our itinerary. Suggested by Al Nocita, the bottling plant sits on ground that once was the famous Irwindale Speedway, but that's not why he suggested this particular stretch of LA County real estate. It seems that back in the Sixties, when he was much younger,

South Motor Avenue served as an unofficial racing venue and Nocita was a willing and active participant.

Today, as a reminder of its past, it houses a number of automotive-related shops. Behind the fence at Hansen Chassis we spied a raw '65 Dodge Coronet B-Body Mopar undergoing the start of what looked like a ground-up restoration. Later we learned that it belonged to Al Nocita and would form the basis for his next Mosher-built Super Stock re-creation.



### The Tour

**Start** • Le Roy's Highland Restaurant, 523 W Huntington Dr Monrovia, CA 91016 001 626 357 5076

**A** • Blair's Speed Shop, 2771 E Foothill Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91107 001 626 795 7201

**B** • MOONEYES USA, Inc. 10820 S. Norwalk Blvd. Santa Fe Springs, CA 90670 001 562 944 6311

**C** • Frisco's Carhop Drive-In Diner, 12050 Woodruff Ave. Downey, CA 90242 001 562 803 6301

**E** • The Wally Parks NHRA Motorsports Museum, 1101 West McKinley Ave. Pomona, CA 91768 001 909 622 3454

**F** • So-Cal Speed Shop, 1357 E Grand Ave. Pomona, CA 91766 001 909 469 6171

**G** • Irwindale Speedway 500 Speedway Drive Irwindale, CA 91706 001 626 358 1100

### Roll Your Own

OBTAINING Southern California isn't the only region with a rich muscle car heritage. Detroit immediately comes to mind, with Woodward Avenue central to the region's connection to the Sixties' heyday of the legendary muscle car era. But in reality, almost every region of the US had its own miracle mile, where not only muscle cars, but hot rods of every shape and stripe, ruled the blacktop.

Getting a group of people together for a tour like this one (even in hire cars!) can be tremendous fun. The key ingredient is someone who knows the key locations and who can organise a tour and set an itinerary, one that can be easily driven in a single Saturday or Sunday, hitting as many noteworthy locations as possible.

The magic formula is to set a start and a finish, then look over a map, determining what would be the most logical route. The start can be a noted diner where the car guys have been hanging out since the Sixties - it shouldn't be too hard to settle in on the perfect place to begin.

Set the finish line at a Saturday night cruise, or at a local race track. If you're ending up at a drag strip, think of how much fun it would be to get in a few passes if you're in a muscle car (if you're in a hire car don't bother - the car hire company won't like it and you'll look a bit of an idiot trying it in a Honda Civic!).

The sad fact is that once many of these fantastic machines are restored, the hammer never gets dropped again in anger. Remember, for the most part, these are robust cars, capable of sub-15-second quarter-mile runs without breaking a sweat and they were made to be driven.

Think of how much joy you'd bring spectators who might be seeing one of these legendary cars run, possibly for the first time. It's not a matter of getting to the finish line first; it's getting your time slip and knowing that your car is getting the exercise it deserves.



## Detour

**1969 AMC SC/Rambler**

**Length: 181.0 inches**

**Width: 70.8 inches**

**Height: 55.0 inches**

**Wheelbase: 106.0 inches**

**Weight: 2998 pounds**

**Displacement: 390 cubic inches**

**Horsepower: 315 horsepower (gross)**

**Transmission: 4-speed manual**



### **Fifth Stop - NHRA Museum, Pomona (3:15 - 4:00)**

CONTINUING to head east, on Interstate 210 rather than Foothill Boulevard (Route 66) as was our original intent, we visited the Wally Parks NHRA Museum in Pomona. It was there that we toured the facility, taking group photos under the Wally Parks statue in the museum's foyer. We were also able to check out Jimmy Clark's '64 Lotus Indy car and Tommy Grove's '63 Plymouth Super Stock, best known as the Melrose Missile III, restored and owned by Bob Mosher and on permanent loan to the museum.

While more than 500 photos were taken over the course of the day's activities, it is possible that none is quite as striking as the

shot of the four primary vehicles parked in front of the museum's front entrance. The SC/Rambler, 'Cuda, Chevelle and Cougar made quite a sight in all their Technicolor splendor. Visitors, as they entered and exited the museum, were curious as we set up the cars for the photo shoot and commented on how great they looked, lined up side-by-side.

### **Sixth Stop - So-Cal Speedshop, Pomona (4:30 - 5:00)**

PROBABLY no name is as famous in hot rod circles as So-Cal Speed Shop. While its original location, founded in 1946 by Alex Xydias on Olive Avenue in Burbank is long gone, its spirit has been resurrected by Pete Chapouris, who working with Xydias, re-



established famed So-Cal Speed Shop in Pomona in 1997 after building a succession of high-profile hot rods and restorations for the likes of ZZ Top's Billy F. Gibbons and world famous collector Bruce Meyer.

Due to the delays en route, the showroom was closed down for the day by the time we got there, but behind its walls, the So-Cal team was busy preparing vehicles both for Bonneville the following week, and the SEMA Show in three weeks.

### **Final Stop - Irwindale Speedway, Irwindale (6:00 - 11:00)**

IN spite of the fact that it was Saturday, LA's freeways were as clogged as ever, slowing the Tour in its quest to reach its final stop, the new Irwindale Speedway. This purpose-built facility is state-of-the-art in every respect, hosting a wide variety of banked oval and drag racing action. While it was our hope to



**ABOVE RIGHT: SLINGSHOT DRAGSTER AT THE MOONEYES FACTORY; THIS WAS SEEN IN ACTION AT THE HOT ROD REUNION ON PAGE 58 OF THIS ISSUE**  
**LEFT: UNDER THE BLEACHERS AT IRWINDALE, A '67 289 COUGAR AND A BIG BLOCK '68 SIT SIDE-BY-SIDE**

## Detour

**1971 Chevrolet Chevelle**

**Length: 189.0 inches**

**Width: 70.2 inches**

**Height: 52.7 inches**

**Wheelbase: 112.0 inches**

**Weight: 3950 pounds**

**Displacement: 454 cubic inches**

**Horsepower: 365 horsepower (gross)**

**Transmission: 3-speed automatic**





## Detour

### 1973 AMC Javelin/AMX

**Length:** 110.0 inches  
**Width:** 75.2 inches  
**Height:** 53.5 inches  
**Wheelbase:** 110.0 inches  
**Weight:** 3244 pounds  
**Displacement:** 401 cubic inches  
**Horsepower:** 255 horsepower (net)  
**Transmission:** 3-speed automatic

**RIGHT:** '70 AAR 'CUDA WITH '71 CHEVELLE IN BACKGROUND, OUTSIDE MOONEYE'S IN SANTA FE SPRINGS  
**BELOW:** THE MELROSE MISSILE III A '63 PLYMOUTH SUPER STOCKER NOW ON DISPLAY AT THE NHRA MUSEUM IN POMONA

circle the track with our six cars, delays and a full slate of pre-race activities, including an 18-wheeler show, ruled-out this possibility.

After parking the cars under the bleachers, it was finally time to sit back and enjoy the spectacular sunset and a full evening packed with racing. It was at that point that I made a discovery, that the special mirrors that adorned both the XR-7G and the SC/Rambler appeared to be the same. This prompted Art Hopkins, Lynn Brokaw and I into a discussion on their relative prices. Seems that in both Ford and AMC circles, these rare mirrors are currently priced in the stratosphere.

While we were having our discussion, our host, Al Nocita, was on the PA system, announcing our arrival and inviting spectators to take a look at our collection of vintage



muscle car history. After that we took an elevator up to his luxury box where he treated everyone to the hospitality (and food) for which Irwindale's catering operation is justifiably famous.

All agreed that the day was special, from start to finish. While the notorious LA traffic played havoc with the schedule, that was the sum total of the difficulties encountered. The six cars traversed the route with nary a hiccup, proving that these cars were made to be driven, even 30 years later. Special thanks must be given to Al Nocita, without whose help and knowledge of the LA muscle car scene, the planning of this project would have been made far more difficult. ★

## Vintage Road Maps

GIVEN that I'll collect almost anything automobile related, it should come as no surprise that I have an extensive road map collection. When it came time to plan the route for the Musclecar Tour of Southern California, I looked no further than my own dusty bookshelves to find a series of Los Angeles road maps to help lay out our route.

It shocked me, not having grown up in Southern California, just how quickly LA's famous freeway system developed, especially in the region north-east of the city. Looking at a map from 1963, the start of the muscle car era, most of the major freeways, had yet to be completed and surface streets like Foothill Blvd. (US 66) and Imperial Highway (CA-90) still were primary means of getting from one place to another. But by 1970, as the double whammy of emissions regulations and higher insurance rates started to take their toll, the spider-like threads of the freeways had spread across all of greater LA.

What I found most shocking is that most of the classic roadside architecture that we associate with this golden era of high-octane automotive enthusiasm, has virtually disappeared. No where is this more evident than along the foothills north of LA over the roads that once made up US 66 as it entered Los Angeles county on its way to its western terminus at the world famous Santa Monica Pier.



There's not a single, restored classic Fifties-era service station to be found. While some have been converted into other businesses, often auto-related, most have simply been replaced by anonymous canopied combination gas station and convenience stores. What a shame that we have bulldozed so much of our rich automotive heritage in the name of 'progress'. Even the famed Azuza Drive-In has fallen into a sad state of disrepair, now basically a student parking lot for a local college.

If you want to collect vintage road maps, I can offer several suggestions. First, check the listings on eBay. That's probably the easiest place to start and prices for widely distributed maps run from one to 10 dollars, especially for maps from the Sixties. Another great place to look is local antique and second-hand shops. Finally, if you really catch the bug, join the Road Map Collectors Association's mailing list at <http://roadmaps-l@roadmaps.org/>. Their helpful members will help you track down that elusive state map from the year your car was built.