

AMaXing!

Bill Kotula owns one of the true gems of AMC's performance heritage – the FIA Class B Breedlove AMX



Words and Photography: Richard Truesdell and the William Kotula archives

When you go to as many auto shows as we do, especially ones focused on cars from American Motors, you see a lot of cars with the AMC trademark red, white and blue (r/w/b) 'hash' paint scheme. Sometimes these will be legitimate AMC-built production cars. Other times it's just a car repainted by its owner recalling that short span in history, from 1968 to 1975, when AMC shed its 'the only race we're concerned with is the human race' image. With names like Donahue, Follmer, Revson, Shehan and Allison behind the wheel, AMC

gave the Big Three all the competition on the track they could handle. Yet it was hard to undo overnight the previous 15 years of such a carefully crafted econocar image. At the American Motors Owners Club national meet in Scottsdale, Arizona, we encountered another r/w/b car, this one a 1968 AMX that was detailed to look like one of the two cars Craig and Lee Breedlove, along with SCCA racer Ron Dykes, used to set eight international, 16 national, 66 American Closed Car, 14 American and two national unlimited speed records. (At the time, the Breedloves

were holders of the men's [600.61mph] and women's [308.56] land speed records.) This was the number one car, the larger-engined AMX that was responsible for 16 records in the FIA Class B for cars displacing 305 to 488 cubic inches. At first glance, we thought this was one really great looking clone. But after walking around the car we knew that there was something different, something special about this car. We located William Kotula, the current owner's father, who verified the car was the real deal, and soon tracked down owner Bill Kotula. Bill along with Mike



Randall (whose former Mesa, Arizona, AMC dealership had campaigned a number of AMC vehicles, and was featured in the April 2006 issue) helped us piece together the history of the car.

Randall was its first 'owner' after AMC and Breedlove were finished with it. After the record attempt and subsequent promotional tour for the AMX, timed to give traction to the introduction of its production counterpart in the spring of 1968, the car returned to Breedlove's shop in Torrance, California, where it had the misfortune of being stored when a flash flood hit Southern California, covering the car in mud.

Ultimately the car ended up at the AMC El Segundo regional zone sales office, not far from Breedlove's Torrance, California, shop,

where Randall first encountered it. When he asked if the car was for sale, Bill Benson the zone sales manager asked Mike if he had a trailer. Mike said yes and he again asked the price, to which Benson again asked, 'Do you have a trailer?' It was then that Mike realised that Benson just wanted to get rid of the mud-encrusted wreck (less the supercharged engine and transmission that had been installed for a subsequent run at Bonneville) and he subsequently towed the car back to Arizona, which at the time was just another used-up ex-race car, not the near-priceless relic that it would ultimately become.

Following the Trail

Randall owned the car for a number of years, and after cleaning it up, performed the

first of what would be a number of restorations. During this period, after some modifications, the car was back on the track with a heavily massaged 343 running quarter-mile ET's in the 10.50 range. The next owner after Randall was a young man in the Air Force stationed in Tucson, who used the AMX as a daily driver. The next owner was a local AMC enthusiast named Joe Antonelli. Joe and his partner, Pete Lopez, started drag racing the car again and ultimately Lopez bought out Joe's share of the car.

By this time the car was equipped with a Penske motor that finally spun a bearing. Lopez decided to exchange the AMX for another car he wanted and Frank Muñoz became the fifth owner. Muñoz worked with Lopez at the same performance shop and



the AMX sat abandoned in the back of the shop for almost a year before Muñoz decided to sell it to Joe Terrill of Visalia, California, who at the time was racing a 401cu.in. Gremlin.

Terrill was told the AMX was one of the Breedlove cars when he purchased it so he was aware of its history. After racing the car for a while he decided that the car would be best off restored and returned to the 1968 speed record run configuration. The chronology of the Breedlove AMX reaches its current owner in June of 1987, when Terrill decided to sell the AMX. He wanted to build an AMX for drag racing and realised that it would be criminal to start with a car with this kind of history behind it.

Kotula bought the car in August, 1987 and promised to Terrill that ultimately he would continue to restore the car, returning it, as best he was able, to preserve the legacy of the Breedlove AMX. At the time Kotula worked at the Chrysler Proving Grounds in Wittmann, Arizona, and in 1990, was transferred to Michigan, leaving the Breedlove car behind in storage in Arizona. There it remained for the next 13 years when in 2003,



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Kotula decided it was time to fulfill his promise to Terrill.

New Life

After 13 years in storage, although Kotula thought it looked presentable,

he decided to strip down the AMX to bare metal and put a proper respray on the car. After this was completed its first official coming-out party was the 2004 Chrysler Employee Motorsports Association (CEMA)





Show at the Walter P. Chrysler Museum adjacent to the Chrysler Technical Center in Auburn Hills. Now the story has come almost full circle. With its showing at the AMO meet in Scottsdale, it was reunited

with its first post-Breedlove owner, Mike Randall, who literally had tears in his eyes when he saw it for the first time after almost 30 years.

A few weeks later, at the Woodward Dream Cruise, the AMX was on

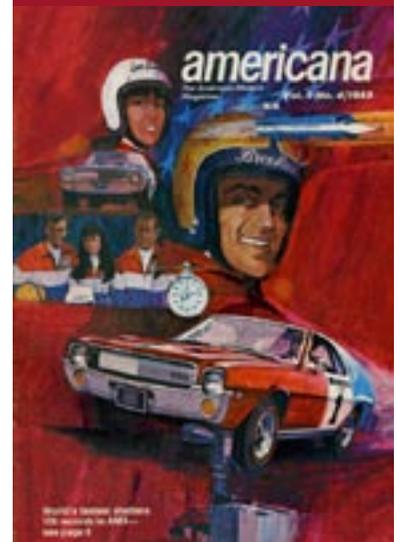
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Breedlove in a Barn

We've all heard the stories of valuable musclecars stashed away in barns and warehouses but would you believe that the 290/304 companion Breedlove Class C car has survived and, remarkably, is located about 30 miles from its sister car profiled here? John Miller of Onsted, Michigan, is the custodian of this piece of AMC history.

'While family matters have gotten in the way in the past,' says Miller, 'Things like raising kids, things like that, now it's the car's turn. I keep the car safely tucked away in a heated and dehumidified garage and I'm always looking for parts I need. It still retains about 90-percent of the modifications made by the Breedloves and I feel really fortunate that the car is as complete as it is.'

The Class C Breedlove car is remarkably well documented starting with its initial sale by American Motors Sales Corporation to John E. Modovsky Jr. on July 1st, 1970, through a succession of owners up to March 13th, 1982, when it was bought by Miller. Hopefully now that his obligations of raising a family are behind him, Miller and his wife can turn their attentions to the stepchild in their garage. We look forward to the day when its restoration is complete. You can be sure that when that date happens, *Classic American* will be there.



display along with Bill Derringer's 1970 AMX (who built the date-correct 390 that now resides in Kotula's AMX) at the CEMA (www.cemaclub.org) collection at Woodward and 13-Mile. Some questioned why two American Motors two-seaters were on display in a collection of noteworthy Mopar iron, not realising that Chrysler bought AMC in 1987. Others had no idea of what makes these AMXs so noteworthy (at the time they were the only other American two-seaters besides the Corvette), but most enthusiasts realise that these cars are now exactly where they belong. ✪



Craig Breedlove Today and Yesterday

HIS youthful good looks makes it hard to believe that more than 40 years ago, Craig Breedlove started a streak that made him the first man to travel more than 400, 500 and 600mph on land. And that if all goes according to plan, he will add the 800mph benchmark to his resume, breaking the sound barrier on land as well as returning the world's land speed record to the United States in the third incarnation of the Spirit of America, a rocket-powered car that has more in common with the space shuttle than any car we are likely to drive in our lifetimes.

At his shop in Rio Vista, California, Craig Breedlove sat down with *Classic American* in what was supposed to be a short interview about his 1967-1968 involvement with American Motors. Our conversation ultimately stretched out to five hours, covering everything from the building of the first Spirit of America, starting in 1959, to the present day as he continues to work to find all the funding necessary to launch one final attempt at the world's land speed record. Craig added some light to the story of Bill Kotula's history-making AMX. What follows are excerpts from our conversations.

Man With a Plan

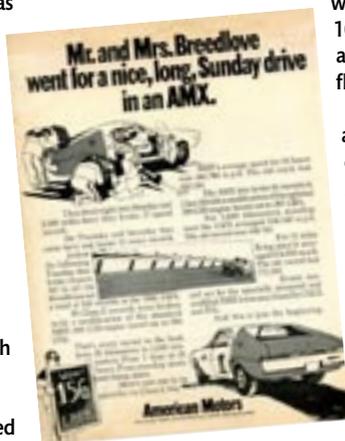
'In 1966 I proposed to William "Bunkie" Knudsen, Chevy's General Manager to build a Camaro to set a number of long-standing speed records. It was taken under consideration but ultimately rejected. What I didn't know at the time was that Chevy made the decision to have Smokey Yunick build a car for them that in the Fall of 1967 broke many of the same records I had planned to break.

'Next on my agenda was Ford in 1968, who reviewed the proposal to build a record-setting Mustang to snatch the Yunick/Camaro records away from Chevrolet. With Knudsen now at Ford, I thought there was a good chance that it would be accepted but Ford passed up the opportunity. Little did I know at the time that after we set all the records with the AMX, he would bring Mickey Thompson on board to get the records back.

'Not long after the Ford proposal fell through, on December 1st, 1967, I got a phone call from AMC's Performance Activities Manager, Carl Chakmakian, to discuss putting the AMX through its paces. He asked if I would be interested. I flew on the red-eye that night to Detroit, where I basically handed them the existing Ford Mustang proposal. The problem was the time constraints, the AMX was to be introduced at the Chicago Auto Show on February 23rd, 1968, and AMC wanted to make a big splash. Carl said that he could get me two cars before Christmas. They actually arrived at my shop in Torrance on December 17th, 1967. This meant that we



American Motors made the most of their Breedlove associations in 1968



At speed, on the Goodyear bowl

would have less than six weeks, rather than the six months we really needed, to get the cars properly prepared. Right off I knew we would have a big problem in that the 10-mile course at Bonneville wouldn't be available in February due to the seasonal flooding.

'Since I owned a Goodyear tyre store at the time, I was able to secure the use of their five-mile circular track in San Angelo, Texas, for the run. The plan was to run two cars and I was anxious to get started. We decided that one was to be powered by a 290cu.in. engine and the other with a larger, faster and more powerful 390cu.in. engine and between the two cars we set our sights on Class B and Class C National and International closed course records, as well as American and National Unlimited records.

'We were able to get the United States Auto Club (USAC) to sanction the effort and to provide the necessary timing capabilities. Our planned speeds were in excess

of 150mph with the 290 car and more than 175mph with the 390 car at all distances measured from a mile up to 24 hours.

Muscle Building

'The engines were sent to Traco Engineering in Culver City, near LAX, to be expertly "blueprinted" ... at Traco the engine bores were cleaned up a bit, thus increasing the displacement slightly. The 290 became a 304 and the 390 increased in size to 397 cubic inches. Traco was already working on the AMC Trans Am program so they were familiar with the AMC V8 and had already fabricated a number of higher performance internals, especially for the smaller motor.

'One weak link, as far as the 390 was concerned, was the connecting rods; they were mild steel OEM components and both AMC and I knew that they would have a difficult time standing up to the stress we expected in our running above 170mph but there just wasn't enough time



to engineer suitable replacements, not with everything else we had to do to get the cars prepped and ready.

'We worked a bit on the under-car aerodynamics. While the rules were loose, we did everything we thought we could get away with to make both cars faster and more reliable as we knew that based on Smokey's reputation, we knew that he already had gotten away with murder with the Camaros.

'For the record Traco replaced the stock cast-iron manifolds with exhaust headers; enlarged the oil pan to eight quarts and added baffling to keep the oil around the pump pick-up and installed a Holley four-barrel carburettor on the 304 engine, while the 397 was fitted with a larger Holley. Both carburettors were mounted on high-rise aluminium intake manifolds. A racing camshaft with solid lifters and stronger springs replaced the stock setup. Our other preparations went smoothly. The stock steel wheels were replaced with mag racing wheels so that we could install wider Goodyear racing tyres. The tyres, of course, were equipped with safety inner liners which had more than proved their worth in stock car racing and as my wife Lee would later find out, would let her run the Class C car at top speed with a virtually flat tyre.

'Heavy-duty front and rear springs, part of AMC's optional handling package, were installed along with rear spring traction control arms, heavy-duty shock absorbers and a Panhard-type track bar in the rear to eliminate side sway. Inside the car, a full roll-bar cage was installed for driver protection and the stock bucket seat was modified slightly to give additional body support. A full set of Stewart-Warner engine instruments were added so that we would know constantly how the engine was performing.

'Engine and rear-end oil coolers already had been installed along with a 37-gallon, cell-type safety gasoline tank. We were able to speak with Ronnie Kaplan Engineering in Chicago, which by that time was well along with preparing the Javelin for its first season competing in the SCCA Trans-Am sedan racing series. That was a big help. While the AMX was clean in an aerodynamic sense, it was not set up to run at sustained speeds over 150mph. We lowered the front suspension slightly, slanting the hood down, and put a splash pan spoiler just below the front bumper to generate down force at the speeds we expected to run.'

Track Time

'The track was a perfect circle – no straightaways – but there was a noticeable downhill side. You could sense the drop along the backside away from the pits. If the engine was running at 5400rpm passing the pits it might jump to 5800 on the other side of the circle as the terrain dropped perhaps 50 feet.

'We ran the Class C car first. The plan was to go as hard as possible for 24 hours. We had been up for 48 hours getting ready. The next 24 were going to be interesting. At the outset the car ran beautifully. Then

little things cropped up. First we flipped a fan belt and the car was buttoned down in the pits for 10 minutes while it was fixed. Later, with Lee tooling around each lap at about 156mph, she complained that the car wasn't handling as smoothly as it should. But she decided it wasn't enough to worry about, so she waited for her normal pit stop. When we checked the car then we found that Lee had been driving on a flat tyre, that only the safety inner liner had kept her from spinning out.

'My portion of the run with the Class C car got pretty hairy. The test was going perfectly when, just after sundown, the alternator failed, the headlights started to fade and the engine began missing. If I came in for a pit stop, I knew that the time required to change an alternator or a battery would cost us the 12-hour record. By turning off my headlights I saved enough power to get the 12-hour record. I pitted after we had reached the 12-hour mark because the records were much slower after that time. I pulled the car down off the top of the bank toward the inside of the track, because there was no guardrail and I was afraid that without lights, I might go off the top of the track.

'To keep going we had kerosene-burning 'flameboes' every 500 feet around the inside of the track and placed every available car at points along the five miles to help illuminate the way with their headlights. After I came in for my next pit stop we decided to change batteries at each stop through the night instead of replacing the alternator. The battery changes meant slower speeds, but in the end we still averaged 140.790mph, covered 3380 miles in the C car in 24 hours and along the way established 90 new records, at distances from 25 to 5000 kilometres.

'Several days later we geared up for another test, this time with the larger-engined Class B car, and for a while it seemed that it would be even more successful than the C. But shortly after the eighth hour, just when we were getting into the groove of the track, the car experienced a gearbox failure. The 175mph speeds and a slightly bumpy track made the wheels go airborne every time they hit a bump, and at the same time we knew that one of the connecting rods was finished. We tried to change the transmission but by then, a bad weather front had moved in and we scrubbed the rest of the session as we were out of time since the cars had to be shipped to the Chicago Auto Show the following week.

'In looking back on the effort it's really remarkable all that we accomplished. After all, American Motors was a small company in comparison to GM and Ford but the AMX was a remarkable car. The smaller-engined car set 90 records while the Class B car, even in running just over eight hours, set 16 additional records. Our success forced Ford to again look at the opportunity and in the Fall, they used Mickey Thompson to reset the records with the programme I had submitted to them over a year earlier. That shows just how much impact we had with our effort. In retrospect it's good to know that both cars survived.'



Craig Breedlove today ...



... and nearly 40 years ago. And the speed bug still has a firm grip on him!



Lee Breedlove in 1968