AUTO JOURNALISTS LOVE TO CRITICIZE CARMAKERS’ WARES. HERE’S WHAT THEY CAME UP WITH THEMSELVES.
You're the editor of Motor Trend. And, naturally, you have lots of friends in automotive journalism. You see them at industry events, major auto shows, and press launches of important new vehicles, typically at exotic locations here in the U.S. and overseas. Now imagine inviting those friends to a bar after the first day of the New York auto show in April with these words: “Let’s design a dream car.” You'll build a drivable version in less than six months, in time to be unveiled on a turntable in Los Angeles in November.

Sound improbable? Of course. But, believe it or not, this scenario transpired 45 years ago. Instead of New York, it was in London, England. The publication was The Daily Telegraph Magazine, and the editor was John Anstey. The car was a collaboration among auto journalists, Anstey, Jaguar, and the design house of Bertone, and was known as the 1967 Jaguar Bertone Pirana Coupe. This is that car’s improbable story.

The Daily Telegraph Magazine was a newcomer in the competitive U.K. weekend magazine scene. The Daily Telegraph newspaper already had a reputation for doing things in a big way. In its coverage of the funeral of Sir Winston Churchill in 1965, it scooped its competitors in the predigital era by delivering complete color magazine coverage just a day after Churchill’s burial. To do so, Anstey had film flown to West Germany, where millions of copies could be printed—because it promised the best quality—and had the finished product flown back to the U.K. just in time to be inserted into Sunday’s edition, a week ahead of his national competitors.

In March 1967, the increasingly powerful Anstey cooked up another wild scheme to promote his weekend magazine, gathering a group of motoring writers at that year’s Geneva motor show and asking them, in effect, “If you could build your dream car, what would it be?” The group of motoring scribes examined what was then the state-of-the-art in automotive design, culling elements from Aston Martin, Ferrari, Jaguar, Lamborghini, Lotus, and Maserati to come up with their ideal 2+2 Grand Touring coupe. But this was no mere pipe dream. After pushing the magazine’s senior management, Anstey actually obtained the budget to push the “dream coupe” vision forward. What’s more, he had the audacity to promise delivery of an actual car in just six months.

Armed with an unbelievable budget of 20,000 GBP (nearly $371,000 in today’s dollars) provided by The Daily Telegraph’s bean counters, Anstey formed an internal design group—himself, picture editor Alexander Low, and art director Geoffrey Ashby—to refine the auto writers’ broad strokes. Less than a month later, in mid-April, the trio had finalized the design. The brief for what would be known as the Telegraph Car depicted a luxury Grand Touring two-seat coupe. It would be built mostly with off-the-shelf components that were available or would be in the near future, and it would be fully drivable. According to Anstey, this was, “a fast and comfortable coupe with plenty of leg-, head-, and elbowroom and a modern heating and air-conditioning system of such advanced design and proven efficiency that we could cruise quietly at 100 mph or more—on Continental motorways of course—with the windows closed.”
ASK THE MAN WHO OWNS ONE

ED SUPERFON has had a lifelong love affair with cars. Growing up in Michigan, he started drag racing his 335-hp 1959 Chev Impala coupe around the streets of Detroit in 1966. “One day, I went along with a friend to get his Jaguar E-Type serviced across the river in Canada at Windsor Motors. They were taking delivery of a 1969 Lotus Europa when we arrived. I fell in love, bought it, and thus began my affair with odd and exotic cars.” Other stops along the way included Phoenix, Arizona, where in 1972 he hooked up with the 20-something Harley Cluxton as he opened a new Ferrari dealership called Grand Touring Cars.

WHY LIKE IT? “This isn’t the kind of kit car in the usual sense of the word. It is a kit car in the strictest sense of the term: it is a self-assembled, do-it-yourself vehicle.”

WHY IT’S COLLECTIBLE: One-off Bertone design, penned by Gandini, Lamborghini’s transition car from the concept Marzal to the production Espada—need we say more? RESTORING/Maintaining: The Jaguar drivetrain is robust and parts are generally available. The air-conditioning system is an off-the-shelf one as is the car’s installed in Bodywork is bespoke, so it’s not advisable to get in a fender-bender, but, like anything, it can be fixed. REWARDS: As in any purchase of any collector car, pay attention to the paperwork. In this case, the car has been extensively documented, with a clear paperwork trail. And there’s no doubt this is the one and only Earls Court idea show car commissioned by John Anstey at The Daily Telegraph. After all, what would be the sense of owning a car that most people have never heard of?

1967 JAGUAR BERTONE PIRANA

SPECIFICATIONS

Engine: 250 cu.in. 8-valve DOHC 12v; 3-litred SU HD8 carburetor Power and torque: 190 hp @ 5500 rpm; 264 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm Drivetrain: 3-speed automatic, RWD Brakes: front: disc; rear: drum Suspension: independent, anti-roll bar; front: control arm and half-shaft, coil springs, anti-roll bar; rear: control arm, coil springs Performance: 0-60 mph 8.0 sec, quarter-mile 15.8 sec Dimensions: L: 183.6 in; W: 73.7 in; H: 58.1 in Weight: 3,600 lb (Performance) Price when new: 20,000 GBP (about $55,000; $371,000 adjusted for inflation)

The next step was to select an engine and chassis, and the three-man Telegraph team (the original journalists by now had scattered to the wind) agreed the logical choice was the Jaguar E-Type because of its well-documented performance and well-demonstrated reliability. But Anstey wanted more, and specified the use of wide-etracing wheels — reported to have come from two different Jaguar E-Type race cars in the U.S. and Australia — that would extend the front and rear track. To ensure a proper cockpit, the team opted for the E-Type’s 2+2 version along with the 4.2-liter straight-six. And surprisingly, Jaguar co-founder Sir William Lyons obstructively backed the project, agreeing to sell Anstey an E-type 2+2 chassis.

Who would build the car, and build it fast enough so that it could be unveiled at the Earls Court Motor Show in October? Anstey approached Nuccio Bertone of Carrozzeria Bertone in Turin, Italy Like Lyons, Bertone got on board the Jaguar project, and after the exchange of just two letters each way between London and Turin, an agreement was reached to build the car. Bertone took it upon himself to name the car Piranha, and, indeed, that’s what appears on the fender script. The spelling was later changed to Pirana because Piranha was already in use.

If the car looks familiar, it might be because its stylist, Marcello Gandini, already well known for his work on the Lamborghini Miura, was also responsible for the Lamborghini Marzal concept car that had just been introduced at the 1967 Geneva auto show. The Marzal, besides being an inspiration for the Pirana, would serve as a precursor for the bodywork on the Lamborghini Espada 2+2, which would be introduced the following year and enjoy a 10-year production run over three series. (The Espada itself spawned a one-off, a four-door version called the Tamba, at the 1978 Turin auto show, which was styled by Pietro Fera.)

The Earls Court show was now just five months away, and Carrozzeria Bertone went to work to turn the idea car into a reality. With the overall package determined, the process moved forward with a clay model, which led to a set of full-size drawings from which a full-sized mock-up was constructed in wood and clay to refine critical surface details. From this mock-up, the craftsmen at Carrozzeria Bertone hammered out a monocoque by hand, fashioned from a combination of steel and alloy panels. What would become the Pirana took shape in mere weeks.

Anstey made several trips to Turin to personally supervise the project. These meetings included Bertone, Gandini, Bertone’s commercial manager Enzo Piacenza, Jaguar’s Bob Berry, and Brian Smith from Smothes Industries. Bishop, assistant chief engineer for special products at Smiths, also made several trips to Turin to supervise the project. Smiths was responsible for the development of the heating and air-conditioning system, in which all air enters the cabin through vents behind the rear windows and is cooled and dehumidified. If warm air is needed, the air travels through a heater box behind the rear seat, then flows forward along ducts built into the doors. If cool air is desired, it flows through a perforated distributor mounted in the cockpit roof.

The system’s condenser and compressor are mounted up front in the engine compartment, with evaporators in the rear. At the time of the Pirana’s construction, Bishop said, “This is a new idea. Warm air comes up from the bottom, and cool air comes down from the roof.” It never caught on.

In addition to the gauges, a Smiths specialty, the company contributed the Pirana’s multimedia system. The Pirana features an in-dash AM/FM radio with a cassette player/recorder in the center console between the seats. At a time when Steve Jobs was a boy growing up in Silicon Valley this was state-of-the-art in-car multimedia, and it was one of the first mobile applications of the then-new Philips cassette. The rest of the interior design, given its Bertone origins, is much more Italian than British, a clear upgrade from the Pirana’s E-Type origins. In the driver’s seat, looking over the instrumentation, you’d think you were in a Ferrari 400 GT or Lamborghini 400 GT. Equipped with an 18-inch Mairn DBS or the then-new DBS, the Pirana’s cockpit is far more luxurious.

Its cabin is trimmed in bespoke materials, including leather from Connolly Brothers. Other suppliers included Triplex, which supplied the special Sundym air-conditioning system. The Pirana features an in-dash AM/FM radio with a cassette player/recorder mounted in the cockpit roof. If warm air is needed, the air travels through a heater box behind the rear seat, then flows forward along ducts built into the doors. If cool air is desired, it flows through a perforated distributor mounted in the cockpit roof.

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The first thing that comes to mind when seeing the Jaguar Bertone Pirana Coupe is, “Yeah, that looks like a Bertone.” The Pirana bears more than a passing resemblance to the 1968-1970 Lamborghini Espada, another car penned by Marcello Gandini. But if one looks at the Pirana in the context of its time, there is more to it than a simple transition step between two Gandini-designed Lamborghinis, the Espada and the Marzal, as reported in the 1967 Geneva auto show. It was the Marzal that set in motion John Anstey’s quest to design and build the Pirana as The Daily Telegraph Magazine’s idea car.

As a concept, the most interesting design element was its gullwing doors, which featured almost 50 square feet of glass glazing. Strip away the doors and the unusual glazing scheme, and you’re essentially looking at the sheetmetal forward of the A-pillars that was influenced both from the Fiat and Espada that followed. A close look at the sheetmetal all of the doors shows obvious Marzal influence.

Over the years, like the Pirana, the Marzal kept a relatively low profile. One appearance was soon after the 1968 Concorso Italiano, the first time it virtually disappeared from view. It was the Marzal’s Earls Court premiere hue. He replaced the front hides and refurbished all mechanical details—lights, wipers, switches—and the imaginative HVAC that cools down the cockpit as much as can be expected from a 45-year-old system. The Pirana was completed on deadline and was a certifiable hit of the 1967 Earls Court Motor Show, documented by a British Pathe newsreel (youtube.com/watch?v=5gOfDXh9Eqk) and by the enthusiastic motorizing publications of the day. Following its successful unveiling at Earls Court, the Pirana appeared in Turin in 1967 and in New York and Montreal in 1968. After that, it virtually disappeared from view.

Sold by The Daily Telegraph (for $16,000) to recoup some of its investment, the Pirana’s history from 1968 to 2010 is sketchy. It seems it was owned by a British national who had a second home in Palm Springs. Apparently around 1980, the car was painted a shade of British Racing Green, a color not well-sold to its angular lines.

In fall 2010, the Pirana surfaced in an advertisement for sale on eBay with the starting price of $208,000. This is where current owner Ed Superfon, co-founder of the VIP Toy Store in Los Angeles, bought the car. (He won’t divulge the final sales price.)