

Car Stars: Hollywood's Scene Stealers

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Think of a famous TV or movie car - any car. Chances are the car you're thinking of - the **Batmobile**, **Herbie the Love Bug**, or the **General Lee** - was created by George Barris, King of the Kustomizers. (In Barris' lingo, "c" is often swapped with "k" like his signature Kandyapple paint. That's what you can do when you're the king.)

George Barris has created cars for TV and movies for more than 50 years, and he's been customizing cars even longer.

"It would take me a couple of days to count how many cars I've done for TV and movies," he says.

Barris' cars aren't mere extras that blend into the background; he makes cars with star power. His cars steal the spotlight and become an essential part of the TV show or movie in which they appear. What would *Knight Rider* be without the talkative **KITT**?

Barris explains that star cars are "magnetizing, they draw people to the screen" through a charismatic combination of good looks, juicy parts and exciting performances. Not surprising considering that's the same criteria that catapult actors to super stardom as well.

Hot Rods in Hollywood

Barris' first paid automobile job was in 1940 for \$20, but he'd been customizing cars since his brother, Sam, and he spruced up a hand-me-down '25 Buick in high school.

Barris and his brother, his partner until the 1950s, were pioneers in the art of transforming everyday cars into streamlined, gleaming machines. Most of their work in the early days involved "chopping" down the car's hood line which made for menacing, eye-like windshields, "channeling" the car's body down between the wheels and removing all extraneous details like chrome and door handles that interrupted the car's smooth line.

Tom Wolfe, in his book *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, likened Barris' ability to mold new car forms to that of a fine artist and his garage to a gallery.

"He is a good example of a kid who grew up completely absorbed in this teen-age world of cars, who pursued the pure flame and its forms with such devotion that he emerged an artist," Wolfe wrote.

But, Barris didn't come to the attention of Hollywood until a move to Los Angeles thrust him into a car-crazed youth culture that worshipped the speed and rebellious styling of hot rods. From there, it didn't take long for the film industry to clue into the teen culture roaring outside their studios.

"It all started when the hot rods were really HOT!" says Barris. "The film industry was interested because it was exciting and adventurous. They got a hold of us to make hot rod movies in the 50s."

What followed were campy teen films like *High School Confidential!*, *Running Wild* and *Hot Rod Gang* that exploited the hot rod culture. To bring the kids in, these movies had to have the baddest cars around and Barris made most of them. But, let's face it, besides a few Beach Boys songs, mainstream slow-lane America wasn't exposed to hot rod culture and Barris' creations. That would all change with the advent of TV cars.

Going Mainstream with The Munsters

Barris credits the 1960s television show, *The Munsters*, with his breakthrough to mainstream America.

"TV offered a totally different exposure level. Suddenly, we were in America's living room," says Barris.

For the show, he created the **Munster's Koach** out of three hacked up Model T's. It had a gleaming ribcage of gold pipes, hearse-like curtains, gas lanterns, spider-webbed wheels and lots of skulls - the perfect family car for the show's ghoulish characters. Barris soon added another spooky creation to the Munsters' garage, the **Drag-u-la**, a hot rod fashioned out of a genuine coffin.

"The Koach became so popular we received more fan mail than the stars," says Barris. "It stimulated the film and TV industry to think of the car as a star."

To the Batmobile, Robin!

The Barris creation with the most star power is the **Batmobile** from the *Batman* 1966-68 TV series. In only 21 days, Barris transformed a 1955 Lincoln Futura into a Gotham City crime-fighting machine with enough gizmos and gadgets for Batman and Robin to fight a legion of Riddlers.

It had "Batchutes" that shot back 25ft to display the Batman signal, chain slicers, oil squirters, nail shooters, a Batphone and more. Unlike the special effect laden TV shows and movies of today, the **Batmobile** really did almost everything you see on the screen. But, weighing a hefty three tons it didn't reach bat-like speeds even with its mighty engine.

Besides the cool gizmos, the **Batmobile's** exterior perfectly complemented the caped crusader. It was given a bat-like snout with hood scoops for nostrils and glaring headlight eyes. The car's rear carried on the bat theme with tall bat wing fins, an impressive exhaust nozzle and three rocket launchers directly behind the cockpit.

The most distinctive feature of the **Batmobile** body was the Plexiglass bubble top, a feature of the original Futura. Barris replaced the center of the bubble with an arched roll bar and twin antennae for "secure" crime-fighting communications.

Barris made five Batmobiles for the *Batman* TV series, but the original, Batmobile #1, now resides in Barris' garage rather than the Batcave.

More Car Stars

While the Batmobile secured Barris' King of Kustomizers crown, his involvement with TV and movie cars spans from the *Beverly Hillbillies* jalopy to the imported street racers in the more recent movie, *The Fast and the Furious*.

Other notable Barris "kustom" TV creations include the blazing orange **General Lee**, a Dodge Charger that constantly bailed Bo and Luke out of trouble on *The Dukes of Hazzard*; **KITT** of *Knight Rider*, a talking, computerized Pontiac Trans Am that was arguably more intelligent than its co-stars; and the **Monkees Mobile**, a cartoonish Pontiac GTO that was extended to accommodate their musical instruments.

Although TV seems to be the perfect forum for anthropomorphic mobiles, Barris' creations have also starred on the big screen. These include **Herbie the Love Bug**, the **Back to the Future DeLorean** time machine, the **Flintstones Flintmobile** for which Barris went on a walk in the woods to find logs (yep, they're real), the **James Bond BMW Z3** which packs serious heat in the fenders and **Grease Lightnin'** which helped a young John Travolta steal Sandra D's heart in *Grease*.

And, of course, you don't just make one car for a TV show or movie. In addition to the five Batmobiles, there were 14 KITTs, 30 General Lees and a whopping 52 cars for *The Fast and the Furious*.

"You always carry at least five to 10 cars," explains Barris. "If you crash a car you can't stop filming for the two to three weeks it would take to repair it."

Even with so many cars, you'd think a handful would stand out as favorites, but Barris insists, "It's like a father with ten kids. How can you choose your favorite?"

"The most important thing is the challenge. Did I meet the expectations of the fans and viewers? Does it make them say, 'Gee, I like that!'"

Gee, George, we really do.

useful links

- [George Barris Web site](#)
- [Star Cars Musuem](#) in Galtinburg, TN
- [Petersen Automotive Museum](#) in Los Angeles, CA



Munster's Koach
Source: Barris Kustom Industries



Batmobile
Source: Barris Kustom Industries

In only 21 days, Barris transformed a 1955 Lincoln Futura into a Gotham City crime-fighting machine with enough gizmos and gadgets to fight a legion of Riddlers.



General Lee
Source: Barris Kustom Industries



KITT
Source: Barris Kustom Industries



Herbie the Love Bug
Source: Barris Kustom Industries



Delorean Time Machine
Source: Barris Kustom Industries



Flintmobile
Source: Barris Kustom Industries



Grease Lightning
Source: Barris Kustom Industries