

In the Garage With Jay Leno



For more than 20 years, Americans invited Jay Leno into their homes via his hosting *The Tonight Show*. These days, the comedian returns the favor by welcoming viewers to experience his California-based car collection on the popular CNBC television show *Jay Leno's Garage*. For all his years of late-night hosting and stand-up comedy, his true passion has always been cars and motorcycles. During his current show, Leno's good-natured personality is on full display as he highlights his assemblage of more than 150 rare and exotic automobiles from around the globe. But Leno doesn't believe in treating his cars as mere precious baubles that can't be touched; they're meant to rumble, and rumble they do as he takes them out for a spin on city streets, inviting the audience along for a vicarious ride.

Catching up with Leno during a break from filming his new episodes, we learned more about his passion for automobiles and his take on the classic-car hobby today.

AAA World: What was it like growing up as a car buff in your family?

Jay Leno: When I was 16, I went with my parents when they were buying a 1966 Ford Galaxie. The dealer was out of stock, but I convinced my dad to order one and asked if I could pick the engine. My mother said, 'Oh, let the boy pick it. What difference does it make?' I pulled the salesman aside and said, 'We want the 428-cubic-inch 7-liter motor with the police pursuit package and the muffler delete option.'

A month later when we picked up the car, my dad started the engine, and it roared: 'HUM-UHNA, HUM-UHNA, HUM-UHNA.' He started screaming that there's a hole in the muffler. The salesman explained that a muffler doesn't come with the police pursuit package. Well, now my dad knows he's been had and is shooting knife stares at me. He didn't speak to me for a month. But some time later, I was in my parents' room, and I noticed he had a speeding ticket for going 110 miles an hour. The car actually made him the coolest guy in the insurance office where he worked.

AAAW: What was your first car?

Leno: When I was 14 years old, I found a '34 Ford pickup for sale at a gas station in Reading, Massachusetts. I bought it with the money I made working, and my dad helped out a bit. We dragged it home, and after I got it running, I practiced going up and down the driveway for two years until I earned my license.

AAAW: What types of cars would be a good entryway for someone into the classic-car hobby?

Leno: I predict the Mazda Miata will be the Mustang of 2025 because the first generation was easy to work on and they were pretty cool cars. Plus, they sold a million of them, so there are plenty out there. An exotic collectible that's cheap is a 1960s Chevy Corvair. Here was the first truly European-style American car that really was the American Porsche. [Among the features the two cars shared was a rear-mounted, air-cooled engine.] It was revolutionary at the time.

AAAW: What is your wife Mavis' involvement in your car collection?

Leno: She doesn't get involved in it, but at least she knows where I am. When you come home reeking of transmission fluid, [your wife knows] you're not out fooling around. I've never really thought of my stuff as a collection; I just never sold anything. All my cars are registered, and I drive them all.

AAAW: In the age of Uber and self-driving cars, what do you see as the future of the car hobby?

Leno: I find that less young people are interested in cars, but the ones who are know way more than we did at their age. I'm astounded when I get some of these 18-year-old technicians in here and they know how to work on everything. I just think it changes. It's like Mark Twain said, 'I like progress; it's change I don't like.' So I'm optimistic about the hobby.

—Larissa and Michael Milne

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