

THE HEALEY

THIRTY THOUSAND BUCKS FOR A HEALEY?!! I stared at the magazine in disbelief. There it was, in black and white. "1959 Austin-Healey 100-6. Runs good. \$30,000." I thought for a moment it was a misprint, but this was one of those magazines that specializes in antique and classic car ads, and there were several Healeys for sale at similar prices. Who in the world would pay that kind of dough for a Healey? Then it dawned on me. This car bore no resemblance to the Healeys I have known. When I think of a Healey, I don't think of a \$30,000 show car gliding noiselessly down a manicured boulevard. I think of the \$350 Hurtin' Healey my friend Don bought in 1971.

The summer of 1971 was the summer Don and I discovered sports cars. It began in the spring, at the end of our sophomore year in college, when we were cruising the back alleys of the low rent districts, looking for derelict sports cars with our friend Nick. Nick's dad ran a sports car dealership in a nearby railroad town, and we were looking for hulks that could either be rebuilt or stripped for parts. I was amazed at how many we found. A Triumph Spitfire with no wheels rusting beside a garage, a Morris Minor in a chicken coop, an MG Midget in a back yard with several baskets of engine parts on the porch. (I remember the Midget in particular because chocolate milk ran out of the carburetors and down my leg when we picked up the block. I never did learn why there was chocolate milk in the carburetors. Maybe it was some sort of an Indiana farm liniment for ailing dogs, horses, and machinery.) When we found a \$50 MGA with a mashed front end, I fell in love. After investing about \$500 in parts and paint, along with a healthy dose of sweat equity, I joined the sports car fraternity.

If I took the high road to sports car ownership, Don took the low road. He found a 1959 Austin Healey 100-6 decomposing in the back corner of a used car lot and bought it for \$350. Actually, he bought the parts for \$350. There was no conceivable way this vehicle would ever pass the state safety inspection, so the dealer sold it to him for "parts only." The fact that a title accompanied these parts and my friend drove them off the lot didn't seem to bother him. If the value of a car were based on appearance alone, Don got robbed. The car had originally been painted red, but over the years it had mutated into a two-tone: red over rust. A previous owner had attempted to repair the bodywork with racing stickers. Round holes were covered with STP

stickers, square rust-outs were patched with Castrol stickers, and a giant American flag covered what was left of the trunk lid. The top was a dirt-streaked white, with a slightly translucent amber rear window. The famous "Kilroy was here" caricature and fence were scrawled on the top in red paint. Like an old family horse, it was swaybacked. The doors still opened, but the frame had sagged to the point where the latches no longer met the sill and it took a pair of screen door hooks to keep the doors closed. The wheels gave mute testimony to the ingenuity, though not the craftsmanship, of America's backyard mechanics. The center "knock off" hubs of the original wire wheels had been welded into the center of a much wider set of steel wheels. Three wide strips of steel plate, roughly cut out with a torch, served to brace the wheels to the hubs. Through luck or divine intervention (even the most charitable observer would not attribute it to skill), the wheels turned true without a trace of wobble. A set of Goodyear Wide Oval bias ply tires graced these mangled mags. It was easy to measure how far the tires protruded beyond the bodywork, as the fenders had cut grooves in the tires where they bottomed out on bumps. The crowning glory, the pièce d'resistance of this automotive object d'art, was a pair of two foot long chromed boat horns mounted prominently on the left front fender. Resplendent in all their gleaming brightness, they were even more conspicuous because they were the only piece of metal on the entire vehicle that still had a shine to it. All in all, the appearance of this car was enough to elicit comment from even the most apathetic non-enthusiast, and it made true sports car aficionados retch.

Beauty, as they say, is only skin deep, and in the case of the Hurtin' Healey that applied to Ugly as well. Despite its appearance, despite the cracks in the main frame members, and despite the bewildering array of hardware store switches someone had installed on the dashboard, this Healey could move! It took a great deal of faith and patience to coax the big six cylinder engine into life, particularly on a cold, damp morning, but once it caught it roared into life with a ferocity that shook the entire car. First gear was engaged with a "crunch" which tortured the mechanically cognizant. The gear lever had to be held forward with brute force lest it pop back into neutral when the clutch was engaged, but if you could hold it in gear the car would leap forward like a jackrabbit! Second through fourth gears were well behaved by comparison, and the car would surge forward as though it was riding the crest of a wave. Several of my friends had late '60s "muscle cars" which I'm sure were technically faster than the Healey, but they didn't convey the same sensation of speed and power. Possibly this was because they also didn't convey the same sensation that they were going to disintegrate at any moment, or

maybe it was because they gave the driver some reassurance that if he relaxed his concentration for a moment they would continue to travel in a straight line. Whatever the reason, that Healey seemed like the fastest car in the world. It would reach 100 mph in almost no time at all, and with Don at the wheel, it frequently did. A slight ripple in the pavement would cause it to leap into the air like a champion steeplechaser, slam back to earth with a sickening crash, and hurtle down the road searching for the next pothole. It seemed accustomed to these leaps, probably because the shock absorbers had given up the ghost years earlier. In fact, the first major jump we attempted somehow "healed" the long dormant electric overdrive. The dealer had assured us the overdrive was beyond repair, but when Don accidentally turned onto an abandoned dirt road on our test drive the overdrive kicked in as soon as we crashed over the first pothole. It continued to function properly for the rest of the time Don owned the Healey.

If a day trip in the Hurtin' Healey could be described as "exhilarating," a night trip was downright terrifying. I can still vividly recall the way that car would hurtle through the blackness of an Indiana country road, with one feeble headlight intensifying the darkness by illuminating a small patch of pavement and a shadow of cornfields on either side. (The other headlight, owing to a small rust problem with the adjusting screws, would be helpfully illuminating any tree branches that hung over the roadway.) Don would be hunched over the steering wheel, his grinning face intermittently visible as the dash lights flickered on and off. Like a hapless passenger in a roller coaster from Hell, I would be hunched forward too, trying to spot the next pothole in time to brace for the impact . . . There's one now! . . . Crash!!! The Healey would leap into the air, then fall to earth with a second, bone-jarring crunch. Sparks shot from the fenders each time the car landed, as the long eroded fenders bit deeper into the Wide Oval tires. A sudden crash, a brief shower of sparks, and the Healey would plunge deeper into the darkness, the moonlight sparkling off those gleaming boat horns.

Don, the owner of this mechanical Armageddon, was at least as remarkable as the Healey he drove. Six foot four of gangling leanness, he had an unruly mop of dark hair, a slightly continental manner, and a smile that could charm the socks off a centipede. He could infuse a

simple phrase like "I'm sorry officer, was I doing something wrong?" with a mixture of courtesy and innocence that would soften the heart of even the most jaded County Sheriff. The fact that he generally drove with the top down, even in the rain, while wearing a deerstalker hat, a pair of gold pince-nez glasses, and smoking a curved pipe served to further disorient the gendarmes. The appearance of the Healey led one to expect it might be driven by Charles Manson, or maybe Ché Guevara, but certainly not this polite mixture of Sherlock Holmes and FDR. On at least one occasion an officer who began with the intention of handcuffing the idiot who was blasting through the countryside with no taillights wound up holding a flashlight and offering suggestions while Don experimentally connected various loose wires in the trunk, hoping to find the combination that would coax his taillights back to life. On the rare occasions when he had the top up, his appearance was no less remarkable. The top had gradually shrunk over the years to the point where he could put up the top bows or he could fasten the top, but he couldn't do both. As long as he was moving, the bows were superfluous because the wind would puff up the top like a bloated white mushroom. When he stopped, however, say for a red light, the top would slowly deflate, draping itself over his head and shoulders. He then flailed his arms against the collapsed billows in a vain attempt to see through the windshield, making the whole affair reminiscent of a scene from "The Blob." When the light changed to green he would be off. The top would begin flapping in the breeze like the sail of a schooner that was coming about, and then it would catch the wind and puff back into its dome shape, straining at the snaps that secured it to the car. Occasionally the strain would prove too much, and it would leap into the sky like a dove unleashed, then gracefully flutter back to earth. The unscheduled pit stops that followed these ascensions were actually beneficial from a safety standpoint, as it was usually time to tighten the knock-offs anyway. Don couldn't see spending the money it cost to buy a copper wheel hammer, so he used a rubber mallet to pound the knock-offs tight. This mallet did more bouncing than tightening, so every twenty or thirty miles the wheels would start wobbling and Don would flail away at the knock-offs with his rubber mallet.

Although the Healey engine proved to be indestructible, the same could alas not be said for the rest of the vehicle. Healeys were a fragile thing of beauty when they left the factory, and

this one had seen a lot of hard miles since then. The sides of the oil pan were corrugated, like an accordion, owing to the fact it slammed into the ground quite frequently. The bottom of the pan had originally protruded an inch or so below the frame, but no longer. It was now pounded up to the level of the frame, and both were deeply gouged from moving encounters with rough pavement. The only parts of the car that still hung beneath the frame were a few sections of bright copper wire, long since stripped of their insulation. These were flexible enough to push up out of the way when the car bottomed out, and they still occasionally conducted electricity to the nether reaches of the car. The frame itself was cracked in several places, and the first time we put the car up on a hoist we marveled at the fact that the floorboards were made from old antifreeze cans. We never understood why they lasted as long as they did, but long after the factory bodywork crumbled into rust you could still scrape the mud off the floorboards and read the correct amount of antifreeze needed to protect the car to -40°F.

The Healey also suffered from a fair amount of battle damage during our acquaintance. Once, while driving through Chicago, Don made the mistake of stepping on the brake. Ordinarily this was not a hazardous maneuver. It was usually pointless, but once in a while the Healey would surprise everyone by stopping. On this particular occasion, however, a rusted cotter pin allowed the hood support rod to slide forward when Don applied the brakes. Its forward motion was checked when it encountered the spinning fan blades, which bent forward when they struck the rod. Unfortunately, this brought them into contact with the radiator, and they bored the center out of the radiator as neatly as if it had been sliced with a chain saw. Needless to say, Don was not amused when the front end of his car erupted in a fountain of steam and antifreeze. An overnight stay at a friend's house, a few pounds of solder, and a can of Bars-Leak soon put matters right, or at least as right as anything else on that car.

On another occasion, Don and his girl friend made a spectacular leap over a railroad crossing, easily the most impressive jump the Healey had ever made. I was following them in my MG (we were on our way to a pizza parlor), but I slowed for the crossing and they left me far behind. When I arrived at the pizza parlor, I found the Healey parked in the middle of a

gorgeous rainbow of color - red, orange, blue, and other iridescent colors shimmered on the oil slick that surrounded the Healey. We could see this was a job for experts, so we took the car to a nearby blacksmith. It turned out a coin would easily cover the hole in the oil pan, and they brazed a shiny new penny into the pan in practically no time.

Probably the most memorable escapade occurred the following spring, when Don was driving the Healey to Lafayette for a weekend visit. It was raining cats and dogs when he left, so he was forced to put up the top and reduce his speed to a mere 60 or 70 mph. When he got within about 30 miles of his destination, the rain stopped and the moon came out. He then proceeded to make up for lost time. He was traveling on the high side of the century mark when the top decided to make one of its celebrated ascensions. He stopped to retrieve it and, since it was no longer raining, decided to fold it up and stow it in the trunk. There was a security light shining beside a nearby barn, and Don decided to drive under the light so he could see what he was doing. Having driven his rolling junkyard through a blinding rainstorm at an unholy rate of speed without incident, Don proceeded to drive into a ditch at about 3 miles per hour. It was a little after one o'clock in the morning, and passing motorists were few and far between. Eventually a pickup truck filled with friendly drunks pulled him out of the ditch - a ditch that was now filled with motor oil. The blacksmith who brazed the penny into the oil pan had underestimated the amount of abuse his repair was expected to withstand. It was shortly after this that I got a call: "Buy all the oil you can find and meet me in Clymers." At that time of night all the oil I could find or afford consisted of four gallons of Everest (The Height of Protection) motor oil. A one gallon can of this oil sold for 79¢ and was very popular with the student set. Eventually I found Don and the Healey and followed them back to campus, stopping periodically to slosh a little more oil into the engine. A quick trip to a welding shop the next day and the penny was resecured to the pan, as good as the day it left the factory.

As it turned out, it was neither rust nor mechanical failure nor maniacal driving which doomed the Healey - it was the long arm of the law. Don's winning smile and polite manners might influence the police on the borderline cases, but there was nothing borderline about the

sticker on the windshield that said the Healey had last passed Safety Inspection back when LBJ was president. For a while Don tried driving only at night, when it was harder to see the sticker, but even he had to admit this was not a satisfactory compromise. With a heavy heart and a pocket full of court summons, he traded the Healey in on a 1965 MGB. The MG was a vastly more refined car, still had all its factory bodywork, and was 100% street legal. It would prove to be one of the best cars Don ever owned, but it wasn't the Healey.

Just as parents have a special place in their hearts for a wayward child, mechanics take a special interest in their "problem children." By chatting with mechanics at a local sports car shop, I was able to keep track of the Hurtin' Healey. After Don traded it in, it was sold to a man who had high hopes of restoring it. He spent over \$1000 on bodywork (a princely sum to invest in *that* car), but there was not enough solid metal left to hold the Bondo together. Great chunks of it flew off when he towed the Healey back from the body shop. Disgusted, he sold it to a man who frittered away several hundred dollars in a vain attempt to make it pass safety inspection. When this proved to be an impossible quest, he sold it to a high school student who used it for stoplight racing. The kid fiddled with the ignition timing, and the carburetors burst into flame one night as he was leaving a gas station. He sold it on the spot to the pump jockey, who soon traded it to a sports car shop for a set of driving lights. It sat forlornly in a vacant lot behind the shop for two years, until a passing Healey aficionado tried to buy parts off it. The shop manager didn't want to sell parts and be left with a stripped hulk, so he sold the entire car (with title) for the price of the parts. The buyer came back in the dark of night, stripped all the parts he could use off the car, and left the carcass on the lot. (For some inexplicable reason, he didn't take the boat horns.) About six months later an itinerant Knacker Man came by with a traveling car crusher, and bought what little remained for scrap. Ashes to ashes, rust to rust . . .

With a sigh, I put down the magazine. It's been years since I've thought about the Hurtin' Healey. No longer am I the invulnerable youth I was when I rode in that car, and I shudder to think of the disasters that could have befallen us. I have children of my own now, and if I ever catch them setting foot in a car that even remotely resembles the Healey they'll be grounded 'til

well into the next century. Nevertheless, I'd like to think that somewhere in this vast land there's a Healey that is still within reach of a starving college student, a Healey that will rocket down a country road amid a shower of sparks, piloted by a pair of eager hands that can think of no finer way to spend an evening than to follow a pair of gleaming boat horns through the countryside. I'd also like to think that this vehicle is at least a thousand miles from any road that *I* may choose to travel.

*For more stories about British sports cars, read
"Flaming Floorboards," available from [Amazon](#) and [Barnes & Noble](#).*