



# IN HIS OWN WORDS

**GEORGE BARRIS REMINISCES ABOUT BECOMING THE KING OF THE KUSTOMIZERS**

**AS TOLD TO LAURENT BAGNARD  
PHOTOS BY LAURENT BAGNARD**

*Bob Hiroata's '51 Full Custom Mercury*



*The '56 Dream Truck*



*Bob Hiroata's '51 Mercury*

*Sam Barris '49 Mercury*

*The Aztec, originally a '55 Chevy*



# THE MOST INFLUENTIAL CUSTOM CARS EVER

BACK IN NOVEMBER 2008, the NHRA museum in Pomona, California was hosting the early Barris Kustom production. Easily, the most influential custom cars ever were on display there, most to our good fortune. I was invited to photograph the cars on a quiet Monday morning, and doing so I thought the article wouldn't be complete without an interview with George Barris himself. I called Kustom City, got an appointment and sat down to talk with George about cars and life ; those were the same thing for him. This is the first time these words, spoken to me by the King of Kustomizers himself , have been shared. George passed away recently, and it seemed like this was the best time to share his timeless words and passions. Thanks Mr Barris for showing the path to so many of us! (November 20, 1925 – November 5, 2015)

We sat down in George's office and eager to share his story, he began, « I was 13, my family owned a restaurant in Nor-Cal [editors note: Roseville, in the Sacramento

area] and my job was to wash the dishes. Cleaning the plates made me dream of wheels and whitewalls...so my parents gave me their old 1925 Buick. I had just one thing in mind: tinkering it! To start with, me and my brother painted scallops on its fenders and then I managed to get some saucepan lids to make hubcaps and a foxtail too, then I stole every golden door button from my mom's bathroom and installed them on the car's front grille. She was a bit mad at me, so I decided to hang around the local body shops and learn welding and metal crafting; I never wanted to repair cars, I wanted to modify them! »

George stopped for a minute to take a breath, and then continued, « I made my first mod on a '32 Ford for \$10 ...that was cat's eyes...and I knew I had found my path in life. Later on I modified a '36, sold it, and founded the Kustoms Car Club – with a 'K'. I passed my final exams in 1943 and in 1944 I moved to L.A [editors note : George was 19 at the time] and lived with

my family there. My brother Sam joined me in '45 and we opened our first shop on Compton Avenue in L.A. »

A gleam of pride came into his eyes. I knew something good was coming and I wasn't disappointed as George continued, « We had lots of customers and in '48 I teamed up with a guy named Robert E. Petersen and we set up the very first Hot Rod Show in a parking lot. The Barris brothers brought a '41 customized Buick and that was the beginning of it all! »

He paused for a moment, then continued, « I became a permanent partner in this new kind of press (Hot Rod Magazine, Motor Trend, Car Craft, Rod & Custom) and I used to sell many pictures to Petersen. I taught myself photography because I wasn't satisfied with the way pros were framing cars... I worked with a Rolleiflex then a Hasselblad. I love film – this now dead era of analog cameras if you know what I mean... »

George was really getting warmed up





**“IN ‘49, MY BROTHER SAM BOUGHT HIMSELF A BRAND NEW 2-DOOR MERCURY AND CHOPPED THE ROOF STRAIGHTAWAY! IT HAD ONLY 5 MILES ON THE CLOCK!”**

now. He clearly loved sharing his history, and I was all ears. I just let him keep talking, not wanting to interrupt his stories, so he continued, « Around 1948, I had originated the Kustoms of L.A., which became the Kustom Klub of America. We attended every possible Southern California car show, and there were many at the time, and then back to the shop! We chopped Mercurys, sectioned Fords, customized Shoeboxes... In '49 my brother bought himself a brand new two-door Mercury, brought it back to the workshop and chopped the roof straightaway! It had only 5 miles on the clock! It was the first Merc to be chopped and we gave it the full treat, with fadeway fenders, floating grille and so

on... »

Now we were getting into the meat, all the technical stuff that made Barris the King of Kustomizers. I sat with the tape recorder running, waiting for what was next, and I wasn't disappointed. « A couple years afterwards, we worked on Bob Hiroata's '51, which became one of the most famous ones ever, » stated George. « When chopping the top, we decided not to put the B-pillars back in place; that's why we created those fine mouldings around the passenger compartment. On the sides, the 'full fadeway' treatment reached the scoops we built at the beginning of the rear fenders. Then we reworked the front with a floating grille... That car was a rolling catalog of the

*Sam Barris '49 Mercury and the top chop that changed history!  
Appleton lights Note the full fadeway fenders, another Barris touch!*



*There is a nearly 10-years gap between those two iconic customs: one is smooth and subtle, whereas the other is extreme.*





From Top to Bottom, clockwise :

Nick Matranga had his 1940 Mercury restyled by the Barris Brothers in 1949. This model is a clone, featuring the same drastic top chop and the same curved hardtop windows. This last touch will be found as well on Bob Hiroata's Mercury, as a matter of fact.

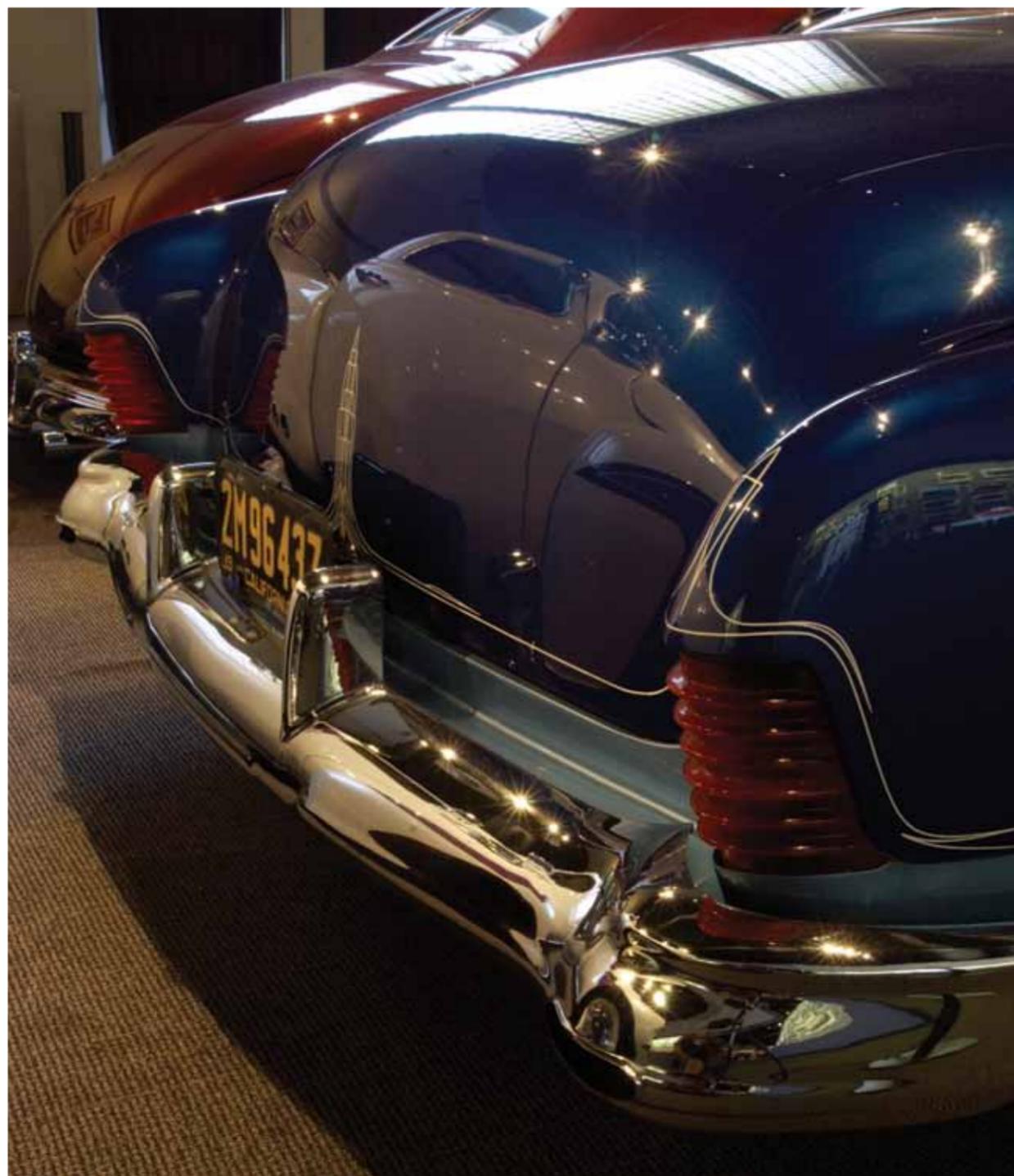
The original car was unfortunately totalled in 1952.

Bill Carr's Aztec was made out of a brand new 1955 Chevy convertible : he wanted the wildest custom car possible. It took 2 years to complete that piece of (outrageous) rolling art, as every panel was modified! The car on display here is the real one.

Both cars won trophies at the National Roadster Show, in Oakland: the 40 Merc in 1951 and the Aztec in 1958.

Note that the quad-lights were all the rage on most of Detroit factory made cars in 1958!





Top (left to right): a rear view of the Dream Truck / The '29 roadster-based Krikorain Emperor / Don Lokey's Model T

(current view) : that 1952 Buick was restyled by Barris Kustoms for Lyle Lake from Orlando, FL. It was christened 'Blue Danube' due to the various blue tones used on it. The restyling on that Buick happened to be also a major influence on the Kustom scene, and still is nowadays. This car is a clone, as the original one was crushed ... in 1998! Please note inverted frenched 1954 Buick taillights on the next photo. Bumper comes from a 1953 Oldsmobile, and pinstriping, originally was laid down by Dan Jeffries.

**“THE MOVIE INDUSTRY STARTED TO SHOW INTEREST IN US BECAUSE OF STREET RACING; THE STUDIOS WANTED TO MAKE HOT ROD AND CUSTOM MOVIES SINCE ‘TEENAGE EXPLOITATION’ WAS STARTING, SO WE CREATED CARS FOR ‘HOT ROD GIRL’ AND ‘RUNNIN’ WILD’ !”**

Barris’ know-how, but we never made the same car twice! That’s how things were back then. »

Finally, George started talking about his famous movie and TV cars. As he explained, « Later on we created the Kopper Kart from a ’56 Chevy pick-up truck, then the Dream Truck, the Aztec, the Blue Danube and the Matranga Merc. We won prizes during the five years following the 1951 Oakland Roadster Show... Around that time, the movie industry started to show interest in us because of street racing ; the studios wanted to make hot rod and custom movies since ‘teenage exploitation’ was starting, so we created cars for films such as ‘Hot Rod Girl’ and ‘Runnin’ Wild’ to name a few. In the sixties, TV showed interest in what we were producing so we created vehicles for the following shows Beverly Hillbillies, Munsters, Batman, Monkees, Green Hornet. Reaching the ‘70s we made the Starsky and Hutch car, as well as the The Dukes of Hazzard one. In

the 60s, I was a design consultant for big American automobile companies, » Barris shared proudly. « I helped create some GM concept-cars and Motor Trends magazine said once that ‘I changed Detroit’s face’... and what car collectors and customizers enthusiasts say is true: Barris is a legend. » He laughed and then stated, « That’s mainly because I started when there was no-one else in the field! Great pioneers such as Westergard in Sacramento where I hung out and learned when I was a kid weren’t many... Back in the 50s, there was a great deal of talented craftsmen around: Bailon, the A. brothers [editors note : Alaya Brothers], Cushenberry, Winfield, Bill Hines... I happen to be the one who knew how to promote this activity ; if you have a market, you got to promote it! That’s why I teamed up with Petersen and wrote articles on finished cars, but also a good load of technical ones. You’ve got to know that catching a vast audience attention is as important as building a car! »



*The 1951 Hiroata Mercury is a rolling catalog of the Barris know-how, and a milestone in the art of customizing!*

