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Car owners take high road with lowriders

JOHN ROGERS; The Associated Press
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LOS ANGELES – When he started tinkering with that old Chevy nearly 40 years ago, Jesse Valadez didn't have any idea he was creating a museum piece in his garage. He just wanted a cool ride that would attract girls.

But things changed between those nights when Valadez was getting stopped by cops suspicious of any long-haired kid in a car that rode inches off the ground and the days when they began pulling the balding, middle-aged man over to admiringly gaze at his automobile.

Lowriding is high art these days and Valadez, a gracious, soft-spoken man of 61 who makes his living reupholstering cars, is one of its masters.

"I had no idea," he says, standing on a corner of East Los Angeles' Whittier Boulevard where some say lowriding was born. "I did say when I was building it, 'This car that I'm working on, people are going to hear about this car someday,'" he recalls with a chuckle. "But it never dawned on me that it was going to become famous."

AN ART FORM

Known in lowriding circles the world over as the Gypsy Rose for the intricately detailed 150 red roses covering its body, Valadez's 1964 Chevrolet Impala, with its velvet seats and its chandeliers, is one of the centerpieces of the Petersen Automotive Museum's ongoing "La Vida Lowriding" exhibition.

Surrounding it are some two dozen other tricked-out vehicles, including a pickup truck owned by musician Ry Cooder that holds an elaborate mural depicting the history of Chavez Ravine, the Los Angeles barrio shut down by authorities in the 1950s to make way for Dodger Stadium. Another is Dressed to Kill, a 1971 Buick Riviera with its eerie scenes of a graveyard at sundown. Its owner is Lowrider Magazine Editor Joe Ray.

"We call these the Fabergé eggs of the car culture," says Dick Messer, the Los Angeles' museum's executive director, as he strolls pass the rows of exhibits, pausing to admire each one. "They are so incredibly well executed when it comes to the paint jobs and inlays and gold leaf and silver leaf. There's an ice cream truck in the lobby. It took the guy 12 years to build."

That would be the work of Mr. Cartoon, another legendary and somewhat mysterious figure who prefers to go by no other name. His day job is designing clothes and shoes, including several lines of the latter for Nike.

Since 1995, however, much of his spare time has been given over to a dilapidated 1963 truck he

recovered from a South Los Angeles yard, overhauled, lowered and turned into an airbrushed work of art. Every inch is now covered in tangerine, purple, yellow and other cartoonish colors that depict clowns, balloons, ice cream sundaes and Los Angeles street scenes.

Cartoon takes the truck to schools to show how it helped a kid from the street turn his life around and become a “homeboy homeowner.” He’s delighted to see it in the exhibit, which runs until June 8.

“Lowriding has always been the most lowbrow form of car culture,” he says. “But out of it comes these beautiful works of art.”

STORIED HISTORY

No one seems to know exactly where lowriding originated. Espanola, N.M., calls itself the “Lowrider Capital of the World.” Still others will argue that it began spontaneously in suburban neighborhoods around Los Angeles after World War II. Others cite Northern California.

“I don’t think we’ll ever pinpoint exactly where it started,” says Denise Sandoval, a Chicano studies professor at California State University at Northridge, whose doctoral dissertation was on lowrider culture. “The reality is that it was popular everywhere in L.A. in the years after World War II. White guys were doing it, black guys, Chicano guys, and they were all getting their parts from the same places.”

More recently, it has spread to Europe and Asia, with people spending as much as $100,000 or more to outfit cars with elaborate paint and upholstery jobs, lowered frames, hydraulics and earsplitting sound systems.

The pastime began to migrate out of the southwestern United States in the 1970s, Sandoval says, when “Boulevard Nights,” “Corvette Summer,” “American Graffiti” and other movies and TV shows began glamorizing lowriding.

It’s very different from the day in 1970 when Valadez picked his car up for $150 from a GI headed off to war in Vietnam and used sandbags to lower the back. Now people of modest means will spend a good part of a lifetime customizing a car.

The Gypsy Rose is still seen in the opening credits of the 1970s Freddie Prinze sitcom “Chico and the Man,” with Valadez at the wheel.

“It’s not dissimilar to any type of pop culture,” Sandoval said. “Once TV and movies get interested in it, it becomes a big business.”

Not that some of the best examples can’t still be found on the street.

On a recent Sunday, some two dozen lowriders lined up their cars in the parking lot of a McDonald’s in East Los Angeles, near the intersection that is said to have served as the inspiration for “Boulevard Nights.” The temperature was in the low 80s, and the bright Southern California sunshine danced off the cars’ flashy paint jobs.

Among those gathered was Deputy Al Martinez of the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, who was prepared for the look of surprise he gets when he reveals his day job.

Attitudes have changed, says Martinez, 46, from the days when he himself was getting stopped in his hot pink 1966 Buick Riviera. Most lowriders have too much time and money invested in their cars to cause any trouble when they get together, he says, and most police officers know that now.

For Martinez, becoming a lowrider was pretty much destiny. He’d inherited his car from his uncle.

“I used to follow him around everywhere,” he recalls with a smile. “He used to let me clean the rims for a quarter.”

To him, the Buick is even more than a work of art.

“It’s a family heirloom,” he says.

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