



UNADULTERATED CONCEPTION

Born from a passion of Fifties sports racers and built with precision, the MPH special is all-Jaguar under the skin

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS JIM PATTEN

TAKING A no-compromise approach in rekindling the excitement and speed of the Fifties, this car is the vision of a single individual, unsullied by outside pressures or legislation. It had one purpose: to please its owner.

Michael Peter Hughes adopted his own initials to grace the badge on the car that was his own brainchild. With a love for Fifties and Sixties sports racers, Michael yearned for something from the period that screamed individuality. The real deal was out of the question for being unpredictable, while a replica would always be a copy. So, in 2004, he contacted Classic Motor Cars (CMC) about a

possible project. He had been kicking a few thoughts around in his head and wanted to see if they could be developed.

The idea was based around the generic style of the Fifties. Think Maserati 300S, Aston Martin DBR, D-type and XKSS; they all had a similar form. Independent sports racers, such as the Lister and HWM, were built with their components fitted into a well-designed chassis and their exterior clothed as if with aerodynamic cling film. This thought process was translated into a theme and sent to Pete Southan at CMC to interpret into sketches (his artistic sister prepared the drawings). Ideas were banded back and forth until Michael was happy with the perfect shape, mocked up

in cardboard first, before the design was turned into metal. It could be suggested that the inspiration for the shape was spawned by the 300S, but, in truth, if you look at any car of the period – from Ferrari to HWM – they all offer their own cues.

CMC used one of the chassis from the Revival Motorsport series (based around the D-type replicas built by Realm, which had advanced chassis developed in conjunction with Reynard to make an exceptionally good handling base) and then made the necessary alterations. A wooden buck was made to form the aluminium body – there isn't a hint of GRP (glass-reinforced plastic) in this car. Once the chassis was built up, the various sub-structures were fabricated to

fit the body to the chassis. Seeking not only outright power but also big torque figures, it was decided to start with a 4.2-litre engine. Rob Beere Racing was asked to build a powerful road engine, with the capacity taken out to 4.7-litres and running on 45 DCOE Weber carburettors. With reliability in mind, the 4.7 unit made in excess of 300bhp with 360lb ft of torque. The original Fifties Moss gearbox was eschewed in favour of a five-speed Tremic 'box, on the understanding that the car would also be used on modern roads. Although the suspension and final drive would remain Jaguar, a steering rack was designed and built from scratch, offering sharp, two-and-a-half turns, lock-to-lock.

In true race car tradition, the car has fixed seats but adjustable pedals. Hughes reckoned that the seat cushions could be changed to suit different drivers. The interior was also to reflect the Fifties, with all instruments and switches mounted in a group in the centre of the dash. Weather equipment had to be a concern so, initially, wind-up windows were considered – although in the end a pair of clean sidecreens were made instead, the former ultimately being deemed too much of a compromise. The hood, with its detachable frame, is based around the earlier MGB where the sticks were fully removable. The clever design of the body allows the hood and sticks to be stored in a cavity behind the seats. A boot space was designed

in, but as this has to accommodate the spare wheel, little space remains for much more than the needs of a long weekend. Hughes must have been a truly contented man to see his creation evolve from pieces of shaped cardboard into a living, breathing car. If it looks familiar, then it may well be: it has appeared at many shows, causing quite a stir. As Hughes has the rights to the design, another build is out of the question. If nothing else, the cost implications would be unacceptable for all but the most dedicated.

Roger Learmonth enters the picture towards the end of 2013 when he saw the car offered for sale with The Old Racing Car Company. Hughes had finally decided to let his MPH go. Roger already had an

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impressive, eclectic car collection into which the MPH would fit neatly. He could tell that his new acquisition hadn't been used much as the condition of the body and interior remained as new.

Being smaller in stature than Hughes, Learmonth had a new seatback made to get a perfect seating position. He was immediately impressed with the prodigious performance, but less so with the handling. Something had to be done. CMC offered to collect the MPH and take it back to its works, but Learmonth wanted more involvement and took the MPH to a chassis and handling specialist. A few issues with the assembly of some components was discovered and some springs deemed a little too hard, and now, with the geometry sorted, the MPH handles very well indeed, keeping pace with the power.

Learmonth has used the MPH on quite a few occasions and it has always been a head turner, but that old drawback of luggage space restricts the amount of use it can sensibly be put too. Always seeking new challenges, he has had a nagging thought at the back of his mind telling him to build a modified XK 120 fixedhead coupe; this has become so prominent that he is now listening, and reluctantly offering the MPH for sale through the good offices of Mark Shannon (details below). He might well be interested in a suitable XK 120 fixedhead coupe, too.

The sun is low as I turn into Learmonth's drive. The MPH is at first nowhere to be seen as it shares garage space with an incredible collection that includes XK, Mk V drophead, AC Cobra and Auburn. I'm eager



Above: Rob Beere 4.7-litre engine packs bags of power

to check out the shapes beneath those covers at another time, but for now, mine and Roger's attention is solely on the MPH.

Roger slides behind the wheel (literally) as it is a case of feet first, then down into the seat, just like a C-type. A few prods of the accelerator has the fuel flowing and a turn of the key fires up the big XK engine. Roger eases the car out of the garage and leaves it to tick over. Is this really a fire-spitting, ferocious engine taking life at a gentle pace?

We lock up and, as Roger jumps into the passenger side, it's my turn to slide behind the wheel. Although the sun is setting lower, I can see clearly enough, but Roger warns me of the slippery conditions caused by mud left by local tractors. I discover this all too soon, and the rear wheels momentarily loose traction before biting deep again, having clearing the mud. That raises a big smile.

The Webers bark under acceleration, and the exhaust joins the orchestration, although



Above: Shades of DBR Aston Martin. Exhaust runs inside the left-hand sill



Fabulous interior

not as raucously as I was expecting. Having already received a warning shot due to the slippery roads, I adopt a cautious approach. Even so, it is obvious that this car handles well. The steering is not only light, it's responsive, too. And quick – but not in a kart-like way; there is enough to make sharp turns without being edgy. I can tell that a lot of cunning thought has gone into getting this just right.

There is a responsiveness to that big 4.7-litre XK engine that belies the state of tune. Nowhere in the range does it falter or fall off. Beere has done his usual job in putting together an exceptional power plant. The gearbox is modern, but there is enough mechanical feel for it to blend with the other components. Perhaps that's the secret of this car. Despite flirting with modernity in areas such as braking, suspension and the aforementioned gearbox, the character from almost half-a-century ago is preserved. It certainly has the legs of a period racer. And

with over 300bhp in a car weighing less than 900kg, it's almost certainly quicker. But where a race car (and some road cars, come to that) was temperamental, this car has no such vices. I've driven a large number of authentic and replica cars, and know it is easy to dismiss a new attempt as just a different version of the same theme. But that would be to ignore the builder's intentions and desire to achieve a personal interpretation of the period. That, after all, is what Brian Lister and John Tojeiro did. Put this car in a blind line in such exalted circles and it would fool more than just the lay person. Not for a single minute am I so vain as to reckon on knowing every special build of the day, there were so many on both sides of the Atlantic, but when I first saw the car at Race Retro a good few years back, I did a double take and thought it to be something along the lines of the US-built Hagemann Special from the mid-Fifties. That, too, is Jaguar-based, and although the lines are not as swoopy, it has the same side-exit exhaust and faired-in headlights. Closer scrutiny revealed that it wasn't a follow-up model but something completely new – manufactured not by Babe Sulprizio, in California, but by CMC, in Bridgnorth.

This is a beautifully made car and easily the measure of any manufacturer. Take

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the bonnet, for example. It is exquisitely fabricated, shaped and riveted to resemble aircraft techniques. The nose menaces, resembling a shark mouth with side gills, waiting to pounce. Headlights nestle back in the wing, faired covers allowing an uninterrupted flow as the front wing moves from the bulkhead, rises slightly and then descends, while further curves drop to the centre and the bonnet line. Doors are small and serve more than just entry points: they cement the front to the rear, where the wings climb in dramatic fashion, aping the curve of the period-style 16in wheels. The back of the car is achingly beautiful, where even the boot lid is designed to follow the contours. Yes, it is small beneath the lid, but no more so than a modern BMW Z4 with its folding hard top.

The interior pays homage to no car; the style is its own. Along with the standard instruments, there is a wartime eight-day clock. Other nice touches abound, like a leather strap securing the inspection light. A couple of power sockets for modern conveniences like a sat-nav are hidden alongside the centre console. The MPH insignia sits in the centre of the steering wheel, itself a reduced-radius version of an XK item. Forget any preconceived ideas of raiding the parts bin to put some interesting items together – this is a no holds barred, no expense spared, bespoke build for which any thought of compromise was unquestionably rejected. It may stem from the mind of a single individual, which doesn't always work, but judging by the number of friends and admirers this car has won, we can affirmatively say that this individual got it spot on. It is also a credit to CMC, which managed to interpret those emotions and translate them into a stunning reality. **LD**

Thanks to: Mark Shannon. Interested parties should telephone 01483 300882; MOBILE: 07785 937756.



Could this Ferrari 276S with Von Trips have given some inspiration?