

CUSTOM CLASSIC

Radically Customized 'Maharaj Merc' is a Family Affair

Mercury cars built in the model years 1949 through 1951 have been the prime cars for customizers since they hit the streets of southern California six decades ago.



Dramatic view of the Maharaj Merc with its 'Perfect Purple' paint showing off the shaved and molded bodywork for a very sleek and low look.

BY ALYN EDWARDS

Sam and George Barris built their Los Angeles-based car customizing legend largely on the strength of their chopped top low riding lead sled Mercury customs. These cars were known as 'lead sleds' because of lead used to fill and smooth metal.

In 1950, master craftsman Sam Barris lowered the top on his own 1949 Mercury coupe to create the classic chopped 'lead sled' look that has been popular for six decades. Sam Barris also created one of the best-known Mercury customs of all time in 1952 when he chopped the top and radically customized a 1951 Mercury for owner Bob Hirohata.

This past April, George Barris was a feature guest of the B.C. Classic and Custom Car Show at Abbotsford's Tradex Centre to hand out the 'King of Customs' Award to Chilliwack's Phil and Devi Maharaj along with sons Rick and Praneel. The award recognized their car as one of the world's best-customized Mercurys.

The chopped, lowered and radically altered 1951 Mercury has been smoothed out with all ornamentation, chrome removed and customized with a 1950s Desoto grille, and many coats of Perfect Purple paint with subtle 'ghost' flames cover-

ing the hood and fenders.

The interior has been upholstered in white leather with purple piping with Mercury script stitched into the seat backs. The trunk is fully upholstered featuring a full sound system that could shatter glass a block away.

The chrome-laden engine compartment is a landscape of murals showing the lead sled Mercury and the Maharaj boys playing poker with Elvis singing in the background. Every part of this car is art and sculpture. "We wanted an imaginary 1950s scene at the Golden Nugget in Vegas just to create some atmosphere under the hood," Phil Maharaj says.

Phil and Devi Maharaj, operators of a successful commercial janitorial business, bought the already customized car three years ago. They took the car to Marty Collins and his crew at Rags to Riches in Surrey to go over plans for the car. "Marty really wanted to put his name on the car and shared the vision that we put forward as a family for an old school custom," Phil Maharaj says.

The Merc was completely dismantled and customized according to the way the new owners wanted it. "Everything done on the car was based on family discussions," Devi Maharaj says. Son Rick, who is studying architectural drafting at the University of the Fraser Valley, drew out

the designs that his brother would articulate. "Praneel has a great eye for cars," Devi says.

Phil Maharaj, who grew up in Fiji, has always loved cars. But the early fifties Mercury cars with their curvy lines and smooth sides captured his imagination. "To have the 1951 Mercury custom recognized by George Barris is a dream come true," he says.

The purple Merc features air ride suspension so it can be lowered right to the ground. The customized car has garnered 67 trophies in car shows entered over the last 18 months. It wins every time and often wins multiple trophies. The Merc received the 'Cool Custom' award at the 2,500-car Goodguys custom show in Puyallup, Washington last August and was the cover car in Performance Plus magazine's spring edition.

A 383 cubic inch Chevrolet V8 engine that looks like it is all chrome powers the customized 1951 Mercury coupe. The dazzling engine compartment includes airbrushed graphics designed by the Maharaj family and rendered by Rick and Daryl Francoeur and their crew at Abbotsford's 360 Fabrication.

The Maharaj family also has a 1932 Ford phaeton hotrod and a mildly customized 1955 Chevy two-door sedan. But the purple Mercury has been the family project

since day one.

"The comments we get when we take the car out with thumbs up from everyone who sees the car are really nice," Phil Maharaj says. "It's been a family project and both my boys have become educated about these cars."

The Maharaj family is now looking for more garage space before they embark on their next project and there are already plans in the wind for another full custom.

As for Martin Collins and his crew at Rags to Riches, they have just completed another Mercury custom to keep the tradition going. The Resurrection black Mercury features deep black paint and 15 oxblood leather hides used for the full leather interior. Power comes from a big block Mercury engine. The grille, bumpers and fender skirts were all hand made with the sound system supplied by MTX Audio.

This new custom is way down low like the lead sled created for Phil and Devi Maharaj and their two sons. Sam Barris would love to have been able to see these great tribute cars and you can be sure soon these two customs will soon be coming to a car show near you.

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Clockwise from top left: The white leather interior with purple piping is by Rags to Riches in Surrey. The front of the Merc has been shaved and molded for a very sleek and low look and the DeSoto grille gives the car the mid 1950's custom look. The trunk was designed by the family to be functional featuring a full megawatt sound system.

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