



Steeds Of Steel

by Phil Houseal

Road musicians and their vehicles—is there any relationship more dear?

Lord knows most musicians can't maintain a relationship with any member of the opposite sex. But let no man put asunder the bonds we forge with our road machines.

This is because while a musician is only involved with his girlfriend, he is committed to his car. That is how he gets back and forth to gigs, his livelihood.



Bill Smallwood's 1954 Scenic Cruiser saw better days as the ultimate musician's wheels. It now sits as a prop at Bikinis, Texas. Photo by Phil Houseal

The classic musician's vehicle is the 1950s era Cadillac. It was the perfect car for the early road warrior. They were big. They were flashy. They were cheap. (Actually that describes many musicians' girlfriends then, too)

Best of all, those Cadillacs had huge trunks. You could fit your guitar, amp, PA system, and still have room for a change of clothes and the TV from the motel room.

Not that road musicians ever stayed in motels. The back seat was wide enough to make a comfortable bed. After a late gig, you could crawl in and sleep until the sun made you face your hang-over. (You wouldn't want to try that in the vehicle one drummer used - a cherry red Cadillac hearse. But the rollers in back were ideal for loading in the band's heavy

speaker columns.)

My personal relationship with cars came after the Cadillac era. My first road machine was a pink 1962 Nash Rambler. Not quite a Caddy, it still had a big back seat and a roomy trunk. It was not the most reliable auto though. When I drove it back to the farm from my first road gig in Colorado, it broke down. I was ignominiously towed the final 40 miles chained behind my dad's pickup truck. But it carried two drum sets and 10 cases of Coors beer!

I struck out on my next adventure in a 1968 Ford station wagon. This handled all my gear, with room for sleeping in KOA brand campgrounds along the way. Later I downsized to a Mazda hatchback. I got better gas mileage (it was during the 70s oil crisis), and I became rather creative in fitting my drum set into the back. I could also carry a bass amp, with enough room left for a girlfriend (if I'd had one).

I knew I'd arrived in the music world when I joined up with Bill Smallwood. Smallwood was a full-time road musician who practically lived in his 1967 blue Chevy van—with all his band equipment and a wife and a kid. When we eventually moved up to a stripped-out 1954 Scenic Cruiser we knew we were real musicians—and de facto diesel mechanics, often arriving at gigs with oily fingers from repriming the engine.

We musicians felt toward our cars the way those movie cowboys felt about their horses. Without wheels, we were just guys who played instruments. But rolling across the United States hauling our Fenders and Ludwigs, we were musicians on a mission!

But it's all gone. Today's musicians drive to gigs in air conditioned vans and SUVs, pulling trailers with their names stenciled on the sides. They sleep in chain hotels and never stay at the KOA.

They probably don't even know how to siphon gas.