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CLASSIC



LAST OF THE BEL AIRS: 1957 CHEVROLET 150

The original MacGyver of the 90's had a Bel Air. A '57 Nomad two-door wagon in blue with a white top. While his regular co-star was a tough yet heavily battered muddy brown Jeep Wrangler, the Chevy came along later as a gift from his grandfather as part of the storyline. What is all this? That is a lot of fodder for some very interesting Googling.

That particular Bel Air looked serene and majestic. And I couldn't wait to get my hands on a scale model since the few that came into Bangladesh back in the 60's had largely disappeared. Sometimes a black four-door would pop up at those infrequent motor shows only to disappear again. That is until late 2016, when Akbar Sattar bought it from the previous owner and set about a restoration task fit to bring tears to a grown man's eyes.

Akbar loves classics. That's an understatement. Young guys have Skylines and Aventadors on their minds. Handling, speed and the occasional tendency to burst into murderous flames are typical choices for young car guys. Akbar prefers old cars that have none of those qualities other than to serve as a moving time capsules.

So what is it exactly? It is the only running '57 in Bangladesh (one more remains but it's a carcass) and these cars are really sought after and valuable in the US. This happens to be a Chevrolet 150, which is the base model. Think Toyota Corolla X versus Corolla G in terms of spec. Except the Chevy was always cool unlike the two Toyotas. Above the 150 sits the 210, while the Bel Air badge is reserved for the top of the line model. They all basically looked the same, give or take extra chrome embellishments and a pet unicorn stored in the trunk.

This '57 Bel Air restarted life as a restoration job that looked great from ten feet away. Dismantling brought out the bits of pesky rust. Our climate doesn't help. It feeds on metal like an ultra-light Vogue model who tripped on her high heels and landed on a

cheeseburger.

"When I first laid eyes on it (March last year) it didn't run," said Akbar. "The previous owner did the necessary work to make it run for the delivery trip but it still didn't really run."

It also had no wiring. All the electrical systems, which was actually quite rudimentary, had to be reworked. The old carburetor also failed. He imported a new, remanufactured unit from the US with a shiny aluminum air cleaner and all was good with the '57 again.



"The carb is an OEM single-barrel unit, the exact one this car would've come with brand new from the factory," he further explained. "Also, when I got the car, almost all the windows were either missing or badly damaged. It only had the front and rear windshields and the rear quarter windows. The workshop I sent the car to for the work (Multibrand) measured the dimensions using the damaged windows and had new windows made out of tempered glass for the ones that were missing."

Lucky for him, the side windows are flat on these classic models so you could cut it straight off regular plate glass panes. The engine is a Chevy straight-six with a three speed column-shift manual transmission (similar to that of an RT40 Corona).

The bodywork took around four months. It was completely stripped and re-sprayed with sealant to prevent rust eating away from inside. That is the biggest issue with restoring cars in Bangladesh, few workshops pay attention to preventing rust from inside. Workshops aim for the surface beauty that

lasts a little longer than heading out the garage gates. This on the other hand remains blemish free for half a year so far.

The red-white combo is a popular choice. Was it the original colour? Who knows? Akbar explained, "It's extra special because of the paint code 'SPEC' which means it came from the factory in some kind of custom paint job, like a livery of some sort. The vehicle was also used by the government of East Pakistan, you can see I left the stand for the seal at the front."

It was difficult to find necessary trim parts for this car. It is a collector's item in the US where it was once widely available. "It's hard to find a '57 in a junkyard in the US with all its parts still on it. They're pretty sought after so most of them in junkyards are already missing all the valuable pieces," explained Akbar. He did manage to bring in the centre grille in his luggage. Other trim was repurposed from different sources. Those lovely metal hubcaps are actually Cadillac caps. They look right though, with an eventual set of Chevy badges bound to make it



look part of the package.

The car is massive. My subeditor, photographer, Akbar and I had a mini meeting sitting in the cavernous trunk. I'm surprised mobsters back in the 60's didn't use this as an official vehicle to transport people who disagreed with them. That could be because the cops were using these cars to chase down the mob, as the 150 was a hugely popular fleet car back then. That could also be because this car was the first vehicle to offer tubeless tyres as standard. Back then, its sales

suffered a little to competing Ford models because people didn't trust the new-fangled technology.

These cars were quite lightweight considering the competition back in the day. Various engine choices and upgrades made these quite venerable on the drag strip and strangely more so at the demolition derbies. Many of these cars were destroyed in the late 60s trying to destroy other cars for sport. If you look under the hood, you will see the radiator sits more than a foot away from the bumper. This made the cars very durable for crashing into other cars because the radiator would survive. In a pinch, you could place another passenger in the engine compartment, albeit the person will arrive a little toasty.

It rides surprisingly well for a 60 year old. It still requires many rubber bushes to be replaced as it clunks over the obstacle courses known as Dhaka roads. It holds relatively tight without that floaty, swaying feel. The small and basic engine pulls strongly, but this is not a car to go fast in. That's a mistake because then no one notices you. We cruised, we rolled and people gave us thumbs ups and stopped to ask about it. People smiled, no one sneered. Very few people honked as the road got blocked while trying to turn it around. This car makes people feel good as they look at it. It's a cheery representation of rolling history.

So what's left? "The only work that remains is suspension/braking work. Cosmetically, I want to replace the chrome I haven't replaced yet, such as on the rear bumper. Aside from that, she runs and drives perfectly and looks really nice," says Akbar.

Now I head back to wistfully gaze at my scale model Bel Airs.

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PHOTOS: RAHIN SADMAN ISLAM



1:64 by M2



1:18 by Motormax



1:24 by Danbury Mint



1:18 by ACME

The 57 Bel Air is synonymous with American pop culture in the same frame as baseball, Corvettes, apple pie and Elvis. But more than a symbol of Americana, it stands as an icon of car design. It was designed at a time when excessive chrome was the standard. Yet, it displayed only subtle flash. The car swept back exuding grace and seduction. It's a car that should grace every collector's shelf.

Let's start small. While the 57 Bel Air isn't a particularly small car, the 1:64 models will easily park on your desktop without taking up much space. Hot Wheels and Matchbox both have the models for the least amount of cash. 150-300 taka should get you either although the MBX model isn't that readily available in Bangladesh. Detail isn't perfect but it will get you started. The MBX version comes as a convertible or a classic hotrod with flip forward hood featuring a blown engine.

A little more detail can be had with the M2 cars. You can get them with opening hood/doors or just a closed

shell car. Prices average for \$5-10 or 600-900taka if you find it here. I personally prefer the closed shell as the lines are clear and straighter. With opening doors, there will be massive panel gaps and unevenness. Kinda like

the actual car.

For 1:24 scale you can opt for the Jada. Yep, that's right - Jada-portionally, rarely makes a model right. This is well-proportioned and detail is average. Other

options include M2, available for about \$25 online. If you want the best in this scale, nothing beats Danbury Mint. But you also have to be able to mint some money if you want to buy it, because it will cost you a cool \$50-100 depending on the body style.

For the 1:18 scale, Motormax and ERTL make excellent value for money models. Opening hood, doors, suspension but closed trunk. Don't understand why as there is plenty of space for adding trunk hinge. Prices average \$25. One odd thing about the Motormax Bel Air is how the door opens. It is spring hinge mounted so it opens inside the front fender like most modern cars. But the real car opens its doors like most toy cars: swing out and away from the fender.

The ultimate 57 Bel Air would be the 1:12 version made by Danbury Mint. Fully working cloth convertible top, working windows, working brake lights that glow when the brake pedal is pressed and removable hubcap and wheels. That's just a few of the options that will cost a cool \$495 form their site.

COLLECTIBLES

57 BEL AIRS IN EVERY SCALE

EHSANUR RAZA RONNY



Ford's hybrid police car saves lives, the planet

Ford has introduced the first hybrid police pursuit rated car in the US with the Police Responder Hybrid Sedan. It's part of Ford's \$4.5 billion investment into its plans of becoming a leading global electric car manufacturer.

There's 13 new hybrid-electric models in the works, including the F150, Transit, and, surprisingly, the Mustang. If the idea of a hybrid Mustang offends you, then Ford probably does not have you in its list of future clientele. Most of these will be in the market as official models by 2020. Ford is also looking at self-driving hybrids, due to arrive by 2021.

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