

# Still ready to roll`

Green Hornet' TV series didn't last, but its Black Beauties did.

By Jim Mueller Special to the Tribune Published April 4, 2002

Let's roll, Kato! Batman producer William Dozier had an intriguing rush job for Los Angeles car customizer Dean Jeffries in 1966. Could Jeffries design a wild street cruiser for his upcoming Green Hornet adventure series on ABC? Something that would make you go pale and slump down in your seat if you saw it roll up against your rear bumper? Based on his surprise success with Batman, Dozier's Greenway Productions had a hurry-up order for 26 episodes of the Green Hornet, with Van Williams (previously of *Surfside Six*) tapped to play George W. Trendle's newspaper publisher/crime fighter. Dozier also had a young karate phenom from Hong Kong named Bruce Lee set for the role of the Hornet's houseboy, Kato. But his lads needed transportation. Maybe a mysterious black sedan with rotating license plates and green headlights? And a spy scanner to pop out of a secret panel in the trunk lid, float off and hover above the bad guys? Dozier's writers envisioned the Green Hornet skulking about L.A. at dusk, decked out in a vicuna topcoat and a fedora. Give him black leather gloves in 85-degree heat; add a green plastic mask and nobody'll recognize him as Britt Reid, suave publisher of the *Daily Sentinel*. All the Hornet needed was sharp wheels--two sets. A working prop car and an identical secondary vehicle for promotional use and emergency duty.

Bill gave me three weeks, said Jeffries, who also designed the Monkeemobile. They wanted the Black Beauty in three weeks and a second car three weeks after that. Jeffries had been down this road with Dozier before. The public has never seen his take on the Batmobile. Jeffries imagined a darker, crueller ride for the Dynamic Duo, one based on a radically tweaked 1959 Caddy. But halfway through raising the Caddy's tailfins, Dozier grew impatient with Jeffries' perfectionism and handed the job to George Barris, who used a Lincoln instead. Black Beauty is a 1966 Chrysler Imperial Crown. There's nothing special about those Imperials, Jeffries said, laughing. I had a friend at Chrysler in 1966 who gave us a pair for free. They were executive driven [used] and had stock 440 [cubic-inch] motors and Chrysler drive trains. We did nothing in terms of performance add-ons. Jeffries says he eliminated exterior chrome bumpers, door handles, trim and sideview mirrors. I think bumpers are ugly. I got rid of all the heavy chrome and the mirrors and smoothed out the lines. You'll find recessed switches in the doors for entering these cars. The panels at the front and rear conceal rockets and the motors to operate the rotating license plates. I designed a new grille out of aluminum and re-shaped the nose. Cleaned it up, made the lines flow better.

California car collector Louis Ringe, who owns Black Beauty No. 1, includes a 10-minute tour of his car at the end of a 13 Green Hornet video available for \$13 through [www.theblackbeauty.com](http://www.theblackbeauty.com). Ringe has BB No. 1 on display at the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles and said he was not prepared for the onslaught of Green Hornet groupies. I've had fun showing the car, but there's a downside, he said. All the e-mails I get. I hear from

people who call my car a fake. They swear they own the real Black Beauty, which is impossible since the VIN on my Black Beauty corresponds with the VIN listed in Dean Jeffries' records. Ringe also has to deal with gaps in the history of Black Beauty No. 1 and No. 2.

After ABC canceled the Green Hornet in 1967, the cars were offered back to Jeffries for \$1,500 apiece. I didn't have any interest in owning them, he said. If I'd wanted another Black Beauty, I'd have knocked one together one myself. So the cars sat on the 20th Century Fox lot where the Green Hornet was filmed, their finishes fading in the California sun.

Black Beauty No. 2, now owned by Karl Kirchner of South Carolina, was delivered to Barris after production of the show ceased in 1967, to be used as a template to create duplicates for custom car shows. We added pin-striping and several crime fighting objects to the No. 2 car, and then created four duplicate cars, recalled Barris. I incorporated whiskbrooms to clean nails off the tires. I like to think we supplied a little humor. Barris brokered a sale of No. 2 to Jack Button and helped Button sell the car to J.J. Born, owner of the long-defunct Chicago Historical Antique Automobile Museum on U.S. Highway 41 in Highland Park. Born owned Black Beauty No. 2 from 1971 to 1985. I was in a serious car accident in 1985, Born said from Palm Beach, Fla., where he spends winters. I had the museum going, and we were doing great business, but I was in a coma after the accident and my brother was diagnosed with cancer and had to leave the business. We closed the museum and auctioned the cars, including Black Beauty.

Black Beauty No. 2 went to a Chicago cardiovascular surgeon named Constantine Dino Tatoes. Legend has it that Black Beauty No. 2 was locked away for the better part of a decade, until two brothers named Dieter came with an offer. I didn't have it locked in my garage, Tatoes said. I showed the car at shopping malls and in car shows. I owned it four or five years, until I told my son Tony to do whatever he wanted with it, and he sold it to the Dieters. Black Beauty No. 2 went to Ohio with the Dieters and was auctioned in 1991 by Kruse International of Auburn, Ind. BB No. 2 was then given a home by Opal Wall of Sturgis, Mich. I guess Miss Wall had a thing for black cars and fell in love with No. 2, said current owner Kirchner. I kept in touch with her for years. She never drove No. 2. She just had it in her garage to admire. When she died, I bought the Black Beauty from her estate. And I have to say, the car is in doggone good shape. Black Beauty No. 2 has the nicks and scrapes you'd expect after 35 or 36 years. There's a little wear and tear to the interior, but the mechanisms work and she runs fine. Black Beauty No. 1 had been through the wars. The car slipped from view in the early 1970s. It didn't reappear until the early 1980s, when a Santa Monica woman remembered as Barbara registered it with the California Department of Motor Vehicles. Ringe, a California film car collector and Green Hornet fan, learned of No. 1's whereabouts and kept tabs on it through the early 1990s. Another Green Hornet buff acquired Black Beauty No. 1 and hired Dean Jeffries to complete a full restoration. Neither Jeffries nor Ringe will discuss this because Jeffries was not paid. Ringe, not willing to give up his quest, stepped in and purchased Black Beauty No. 1--he won't say how much he paid--and has worked with Jeffries to complete the restoration. BB No. 1 was stripped again to bare metal and repainted. A differential was repaired and gadgets that had been stripped off by souvenir hunters over the previous 20 years were replaced. They only filmed 26 episodes of the 'Green Hornet,' which means the writers never had an opportunity to explore and showcase all of the Black Beauty's features, Ringe said. We

never saw the gun pockets in the rear doors. There's a secret closet containing a change of clothing for the Green Hornet that was never mentioned. There are two consoles containing activation switches for rockets, gas guns and the oil-slick device. He has a telephone hidden in the glove box. Kirchner insists he's hanging on to Black Beauty No. 2. I'm a collector, not a trader. I won't be turning her over two years from now at Barrett Jackson [auctioneers]. My goal is to have the car's paint restored, show her and at some point leave her to my kids. But Ringe said he's been in talks to sell Black Beauty No. 1 and is asking six figures. I've put maybe 500 miles on No. 1, but you really can't take this car on the freeway. A few years ago my wife and I were driving and some guy shot across three lanes of traffic to get a better look, and almost ran us off the road.

#### Beauty secrets

#### Here are some facts about the Green Hornet's Black Beauty

- The high-gloss finishes of both cars were covered with water-based flat black paint when filming to keep them from reflecting too much light into the cameras.
- Black Beauty No. 1 has 14,000 original miles and No. 2 sits at 11,000.
- The green headlights on Black Beauty supposedly could be seen only by the Green Hornet and Kato.
- Green Hornet actors Van Williams and Wende Wagner autographed the rear passenger compartment of Black Beauty No. 2.
- There is a Black Beauty clone at the Planet Hollywood restaurant in Hong Kong.
- Most of the scenes showing the Green Hornet and Kato in the Black Beauty were shot in a studio replica of the car's interior.
- The spy scanner doesn't lift out of its base and fly away.
- The No. 1 and No. 2 cars appeared together chasing each other in one episode--Corpse of the Year--that involved a Green Hornet imposter.
- The No. 1 car was used for promotional appearances on the West Coast, and No. 2 pulled similar duty in the Midwest and on the East Coast.
- The Black Beauties are not licensable for street use in most states because they have no sideview mirrors or turn signals.
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