



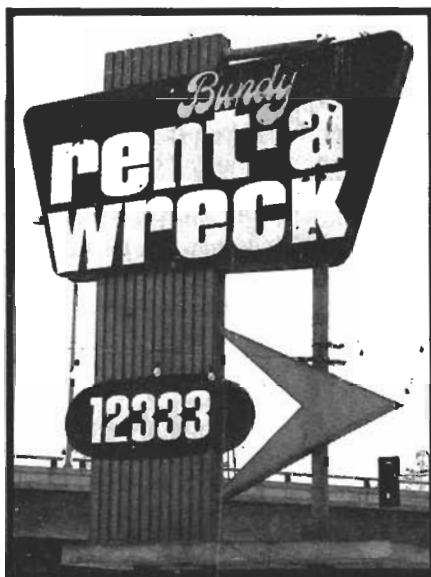
# Getting Wrecked

*Our intrepid reporter finds virtue, simplicity, and good old-fashioned machinery in the rent-a-car business. What's even harder to believe, he finds these things in L.A.*

BY P.J. O'ROURKE

• No man is an island. (A self-evident assertion—no man is a sofa bed, either, or a Vuitton bag.) But Dave Schwartz is, metaphorically at least, an archipelago. His Rent-A-Wreck cars are tiny atolls of vehicular decency and dignity in the Sargasso Sea of automotive slime weed that is Los Angeles.

Contrary to received wisdom, Los Angeles is a wretched place for the automobile enthusiast. Not because it lacks wonderful cars, but precisely because it doesn't. All Southern California is full to the top and gorged with wonderful cars, with fabulous cars, desirable, arousing, priapism-inducing cars of every kind: Cords, Bugattis, Marmons, three-wheeled Morgans, SS100 Jaguars, Chrysler Airflow sedans, Testa Rossa Ferraris, prewar Alfa Romeos, plus



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUSAN GESTON

slews of 'TCs and TDs, rafts of bug-eyed Sprites, more bathtub Porsches than God made bugs, and bags and sacks full of regular-vanilla exotics. Every one of these is tuned to perfection, cleaned, waxed, and maintained in a state of preservation that is positively Egyptoid. To say that the fine autos of Los Angeles are in merely "concoors condition" would be to make a slanderous understatement about the poor Mexicans who daily clean the wheel-spoke sockets with toothpicks dipped in Brasso and then dental-floss each crenelation of tire tread. No, the scenery is fabulous, as I've been told it is in the Mekong Delta. The problem's with the folks who own the view.

The people who hold title to the vast majority of L.A.'s exquisite machinery

are people only by grace of loose dictionary definition. True, they go on two feet and don't have feathers (except in the very worst of their hats), but by ethos they are balls of dirt, lampreys, of-fal, grubs, lint in the trouser cuffs of life. Such an invertebrate, sucker-bearing, cephalopodian crowd are they—heading backward with eight arms aflutter, spewing clouds of ink—that it is a wonder they're able to drive at all.

The Angeleno will purchase a car for almost any reason but a good one. Many cars are purchased to attract members of Southern California's eight or twelve opposite sexes. (It should be noted that the pursuit of libidinous satisfaction is such a mania in this part of the country that, if the local citizens performed any normal acts of copulation, the continent would be ten feet deep in babies named for astrological signs.) Since the denizens of America's Gomorrah are unable to verbalize any idea more complex than "free salad bar," the expensive car serves as substitute for witty come-on and seductive chat. Of course, there's nothing wrong with an expensive car with sex appeal. But in California, "car" is not the key word; "expensive" is. The Southern California Female (a species that looks like a somewhat more attractive version of a woman, but thinks like a mollusk made president of the Morgan Guaranty Trust) can only be caught by chumming with large amounts of cash. Thus it becomes important that the car be *obviously* expensive. A Tatra, rare as it is, wouldn't do, because it appears to be a Volkswagen that went on the Universal Studios tour once too often. On the other hand, if L.A. girls knew how many times they'd been bedded by means of fiberglass kit bodies, there would be suicides on a Guyanese scale. It would be more sporting for producers and directors to tie a wad of fifty-dollar bills on the end of a long stick and get dates that way. Or maybe we should send some of 42nd Street's gentlemen of leisure out west to teach movie stars how to install nine televisions in an ordinary Coupe de Ville. Either way, there would be a great softening of the used-Maserati market.

Residents of Shakytown buy cars not just to screw people, but also to impress them. A Lucien Piccard wristwatch (or a teen-aged mistress) can serve the same purpose, but you can't park one in front of your house. Impressing people, incidentally, seems to be how everyone



makes his living out here. Doubtless, in the less fashionable parts of town, there are men and women with jobs, but in Beverly Hills and Bel Air you do not have a job; you have a deal. A deal is made by impressing people, and you impress people with your car. Great silliness results: Range Rovers that have seen dirt only in plant-store windows, convertibles with air-conditioning units designed to work with the top down, Mini Coopers whose entire race careers have been left in the hands of the parking attendants at Ma Maison, and Lamborghini Countaches whose highest speeds were clocked by the repossession agency on the way back to the bank. And something bog slow and dog-ass ugly like a '56 T-Bird is infinitely preferred to something pretty and fast (and cheap) like a 240-Z.

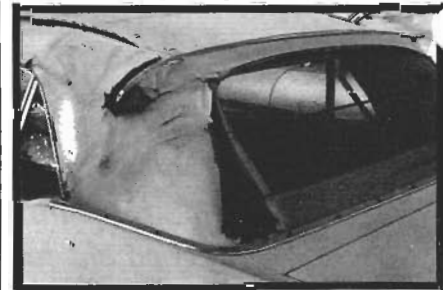
Angelenos will tell you their cars are "well-engineered," though they've never personally looked under the hood and they have to take it to the dealer whenever it needs to be shifted from second to third. (Surely this is the place where the Porsche joke originated: "Don't worry, honey. There's a spare one in the trunk.")

And they'll tell you their cars are "beautiful," which they may be, but how would someone in ultraviolet Guccis with his shirt unbuttoned to mid-femur and a Krugerrand in one ear *know*?

And, to a man, they'll tell you they "love cars."

Dave Schwartz says he does not love cars. The founder of Rent-A-Wreck says he doesn't give a damn about them. These are lies, but they're the kind of lies a devout man might have told about Christianity in the days when that faith

was most visibly represented by the Inquisition. What Dave Schwartz really doesn't give a damn about is rolling bank balances and four-wheeled siren songs to careers in prostitution. The Rent-A-Wreck lot is filled with the kind of cars the Rodéo Drive bottom-feeders wouldn't ride in if their triple-bypass operations depended on it—scuffed, dented, banged-up cars, beater cars,



clunkers, jalopies, go-to-work specials, mechanics' delights, and so on, including 126 Mustang convertibles, every one of which can be parked by sonar with equanimity.

Schwartz was originally a used-car dealer. He set up business in 1959 and specialized in *very* used cars. He did well, he says, because he always told people what was wrong with the cars he sold. In 1970 he sold a car to a girl for \$200, and it self-destructed in an unforeseen manner. Dave returned her money and offered to sell her something else, but she said she was only going to be in Los Angeles for a few weeks and she hadn't really wanted to buy a car in the first place—it was just cheaper to buy a used car than to rent a new one from Hertz or Avis. A light went on in Dave Schwartz's head. If it was cheaper to buy a used car, it would be even cheaper to rent one, and Dave had a lot

full of the things. RAW was born.

Rent-A-Wreck was an immediate success. The rates were and are about half what the majors cost. But there are other reasons for RAW's success. It would be impossible to exaggerate how nice it is to deal with Dave and his employees. Rent-A-Wreck now has over 150 franchises nationwide, and I wouldn't hazard a guess what Dave Schwartz is worth. But he met me at the airport himself in T-shirt and baseball cap. And not because I was doing a story for *Car and Driver*; I wasn't. I was in California on other business entirely. A lawyer friend recommended RAW, and after I'd had a car from them for a month I became so enamored of the operation that I proposed this piece. (Thus what you're reading springs from genuine journalistic impulse, instead of being, as is more usually the case, an excuse to get drunk with the *C/D* staff and destroy machinery.) Dave runs the original Rent-A-Wreck outlet because he likes to. And he likes to make sure people get the car that's right for them. He had me pegged for a '57 Ford two-door coupe—I was completely flattered—but I had to drive to San Jose and the '57 was not an enduro champion. So he put me into something even better, a 1967 289 Mustang hardtop with almost all its lime-green paint worn away by (I like to think) beach-party salt spray and spilled highballs. The Mustang would cost me \$295 a month, with no charge for the first 1200 miles.

Dave had to move half the cars on the lot to get at the Mustang, but none of his lot men complained. Rent-A-Wreck is about the best-natured place of business I've ever seen. Schwartz's top counterman, Ray Tigner, who looks like Peter Fonda with a broken blow-dryer, delivers the most pleasant phone conversations on earth—even when he wants to know when the hell somebody's going to pay his bill. No one at Rent-A-Wreck complains. It's like a visit to the Seven Dwarfs' diamond mine. Elihu Dunbar, RAW's chief mechanic, seems to have the role of Grumpy. But he's lots taller, and can also fix a car. Besides, he didn't seem to be grumpy so much as working hard—unheard of in a mechanic.

I've put a lot of miles on Hertz and Avis cars, and have averaged about one serious mechanical problem for every two weeks of rental. But in the four months that I had my '67 Mustang, I had only one glitch of any kind: the fuel

pump gave out. When it did, RAW jumped into action with an alacrity that knocks Avis into the ditch with the U.S. Post Office. Dave not only sent a tow truck posthaste to where I'd left the car, but made the driver stop by my house and pick me up, too. When I got to the garage, Dave gave me a gigantic '68 Cadillac, deep purple, with a whole side caved in and something fabulous drag-

the name in the first place to discourage business," he said. But he told me to come hang around and have a look at everything. I haven't spent a more pleasant day hanging around having a look at everything since I was a hippie. Everyone was busting his ass, working away at a feverish pace, but practically vomiting courtesy in every direction. I was, as we used to say, flipped out, and

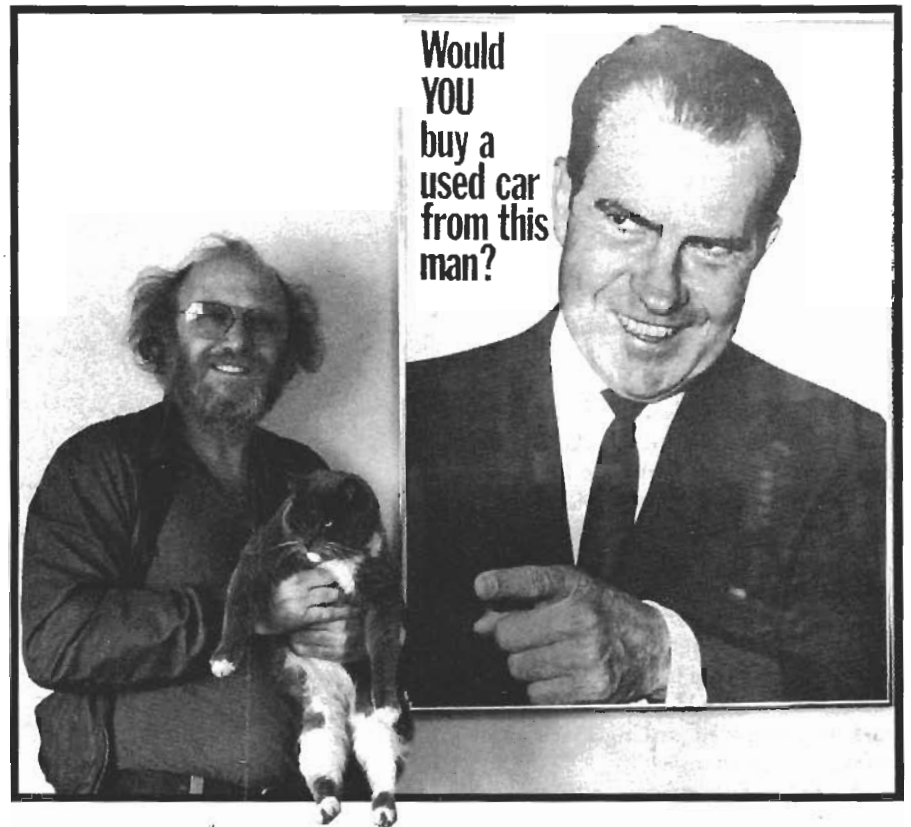


ging underneath it. The Mustang was ready the next morning, but for several days I didn't have time to get back to Rent-A-Wreck during working hours. "Don't worry," said Dave Schwartz. "I'll drive the Mustang home and you can come over tonight and trade me." I did so, and wound up drinking beer and watching a UCLA basketball game until all hours of the evening—a very rare occurrence with the president of Hertz.

I told Dave I wanted to do a story about him. He just shrugged. "I chose

found the whole atmosphere so congenial that I'd have to turn this story over to a lady greeting-card poet or some other hopelessly cheerful soul to do it justice. Calumny is my forte. I'm far too sour a person to attempt further description of Dave Schwartz at work.

The source of all this good cheer lies in one firm entrepreneurial principle: Dave will not deal with a customer who isn't any fun. He says he can spot them by posture, 50 yards away, weed them out from a single phrase on the tele-



phone. He refers them elsewhere just as pleasantly as he does everything else.

Price and ebullient *bonhomie* are lovely things, but my favorite part of Rent-A-Wreck is still the cars. I had forgotten what pants-at-half-mast fun it is to drive middle-Sixties Detroit iron. That was the evolutionary high point of *Automotus regularis*—after tires had been made fat enough to work, but before *Star Wars* ate the carburetor. You can open the



hoods on these darlings and call everything you see by name. Monkeys in the zoo can adjust the timing. Plus there is plenty of car on all sides (important for subintentional stunt work), and they go like a cat with a high colonic. Also, they work. They'll run without water. They'll run without oil. They'll run without spark plugs in seven-eighths of the cylinders. When a hunk of Yank horsepower, vintage '62 through '69, ups and quits, you are probably out of gas.

My Mustang was beautifully pre-dinged and bongo-drummed all over its body—so much so as to make cosmetic harm redundant, if not impossible. Driving up Topanga Canyon, I was forced off the road by some Zen macramé evangelist in a drug-colored microbus. I drove over a couple of hamster-cage-sized rocks and reduced another one into pea gravel with the rocker panel. Visible damage: none. The house I was renting had the Pacific Coast's favorite kind of vertical driveway, which my girlfriend completely misjudged while trying to back up with the aid of the mirror in her compact or something; it took the wrecking crew three hours to extricate the Mustang from a row of Lombardy poplars. Damage: strictly to my credibility at the AAA. And there were a couple of hundred times when I was able to make unusual, even freakish traffic maneuvers simply on the strength of ugly. Nobody was going to bet the formal grille and flying lady of his Holmby Hills half-track on a disputed parking space or an untoward lane change.

This pony car had some hundred and

twenty thousand miles on it. The shocks had long ago been reincarnated as toilet plungers. Everything that loosens on a car had come loose. The transmission was slipping around like an Ice Capades bear. But, Jesus, would that thing drive. It was even pretty slick from a stoplight. It's amazing what a four-barrel and no pollution emphysema did for a little V-8. On the expressways I could whistle along in the young hundreds. But my

specialty was that wonderful stretch of road in Benedict Canyon from Mulholland to the Beverly Hills Hotel. My house was about halfway along this strip, and my morning runs downhill from the liquor store in Sherman Oaks and my evening runs uphill from the Polo Lounge were things of terror for the wildlife, the neighbors, the girlfriend, and even myself.

Downhill at midnight, however, was

## Drive-A-Dream



• The sucktude of automotive degradation in Los Angeles cannot be resisted for long. Driving junk cars merely postpones the inevitable. The only way to beat the system is to jump in and lather up, grinning like just another honest citizen brain-damaged by the sun.

So get into it. You know—do a deal, take a meeting, drive a car, get a girl. It's the Angeleno philosophy. But there's no need to let some fat Arab get into your pocket for the price of a suitable set of wheels: a true Rodéo Drive bottom-feeder never commits to anything so final as a bill of sale. The magic word here is *leverage*—something for nothing. That's why the way to play the car game in L.A. is to *rent* the automobile of your dreams.

There are so many forms of rent-a-car perversion in L.A. that the nineteen pages of rent-a-car advertising in the Yellow Pages reads like the personals column in *Wet: The Magazine of Gourmet Bathing*. Need some sensible shoes? Go to Rent-A-Volkswagen. Want to whip up your urban-cowboy act? Rent a fat-tired Jeep CJ-7. Want something zoomy to impress that fifteen-year-old baby sitter? How about an Alfa, a BMW, or a Porsche? Get yourself to Rent-A-Convertible and look over its fleet of 152 cars, ranging from a '54 Ford to a '73 Eldorado. Demand a fire-apple-red Eldo, commit to a \$200-a-week tariff, and then drive away with 500 free miles ahead and the company's slogan—"Go Topless in L.A."—ringing in your ears. In a town like Los Angeles, only an immigrant just off the plane from Kansas City would think of bellying up to the Hertz counter for a late-model T-Bird.

If you're really interested in wallowing in automotive decadence, go to the Budget Rent-A-Car franchise in Beverly Hills. It's called Drive-A-Dream. You can rent straight cars from Drive-A-Dream, like your basic Seville, Jaguar XJ, or Mercedes-Benz 6.9. Or you can move up to a Rolls-Royce equipped with a stereo system and a radio-telephone for only \$175 per day and 50 cents per mile. People will think you're either a pimp or in the record business.

If you're into the hard stuff, though, there's only one possible option from Drive-A-Dream. You see, this outfit offers a full menu of . . . fake cars. Yes, friends, a fleet of replicars awaits your driving pleasure. Who can resist such monuments to good taste as the Clénet, the Diamante, or the Sparks Turbo? All for just a couple of hundred bucks a day. Don't be fooled by that Jaguar SS100, the MG TD, or the Porsche Speedster—they're replicars, too, although the price is about \$50 a day plus mileage fees.

There's something terrifically decadent about strolling into Drive-A-Dream in your aloha shirt, white drawstring pants, and flip-flops, tossing a few pieces of plastic on the counter, and then driving away in some fabulously expensive car. And this is a rental car. Everything is permitted. Drop the wrapper from your Tommy's burger in back. Spill Heineken on the carpet. Worry about paying damages later. Fling the car through intersections, scattering hookers from the crosswalks. If you run out of gas, abandon the sucker. After all, *it's not really your car*.

I'm convinced that there's no finer automotive experience available in L.A. than driving some gross hunk of replicar from Drive-A-Dream. The top's down, your shirt's off, and you're sweating like a bastard in the superheated yellow haze. The radio's playing so loud, the speakers are bucking in their mounts.

Only one thing more is required. A tiny neon sign for the dashboard that reads:

Welcome to L.A. —Michael Jordan

the best leg. You roll off the edge of Mulholland Drive into Benedict Canyon like a WWII dive bomber. The outside swings on the switchbacks are the psychological flash points. The berm drops so precipitously that even from the passenger's seat it seems that the car is hanging out into death's middle distance. Actually, there is a ten-inch-high asphalt curb, but the curbing is the same color as the road bed and practically invisible after dark; this makes the execution of the turn look far more dangerous than it is. The other secret is to invoke the Mustang's massive oversteer to avoid going high side. But the real speed is picked up on the inside curves, where walls of shale rise beside the car ready to scrub off excess enthusiasm. Nighttime also prevents most ugly oncoming and blind-driveway surprises. (Of course, there's always that chance—a burned-out sealed-beam, and so on. But, what the hell, it's a better way to die than cancer.)

You go down the switchbacks and ess-bends for about a mile of increasing horribleness, and then there is one of the best corners in America—a banked hairpin on the crowned road, set up so that if you put yourself into it just right it's like the trough for an Alpine sled or the track on a Wild Mouse ride. You can go through this curve as fast as you can make yourself go through this curve. Or so it seems. I never was able to see the speedometer. The Mustang's body lean was so severe that the tires pitched against the wheel wells, and awful noises and fogs of acrid blue smoke filled the car all the way around. Then there is a swerve to the left, a swerve to the right, a slam-dunk off a one-lane culvert bridge, and you're into another hairpin, the antipode of the first—decreasing radius and banked the wrong way. This is a very interesting turn, because the technique for getting through it is to aim straight at a telephone pole until you have seen all of your life pass before your eyes up to the night after the Kennedy assassination. Just when word comes over the radio that Lee Harvey Oswald has been captured in a Dallas movie theater, turn left for all you're worth, stand on the gas, and pray the tires catch. (These instructions are for members of the baby-boom generation only, please. A reader born in the mid-1920s who, before spinning the wheel, lets his life pass before his eyes even so late as the Truman-Dewey election will be a Mustang driver *en bro-*

*chette*.) After that it's almost a straight shot to my house—just a couple of easy sweepers with only minor deceptions of road surface around the storm sewers, and those only noticeable at speeds of ninety or a hundred.

My chief pleasure was to find a Porsche 911 or 928, or anything that the driver thought was a sports car, and trail him off Mulholland into the Canyon of Fear. He'd take the first couple of turns in high style, thinking himself Wolfgang von Trips in a hukilau shirt. Then he would look into his rear-view mirror and see a full nine yards of ruptured Mustang grille with one headlight pointed at *Voyager 2* and the other searching for night crawlers. Mister Open-Knuckled-Driving-Gloves would thereupon put his Bally'd foot down a little deeper, smirk into the mirror again, and find his butt in full NASCAR draft. After that I would slow up and let him get half a curve ahead, until we came to the Bob-O-Whirl slot. Then I'd bite down hard on his trunk lid, show him what I looked like sideways in the second hairpin, and take the lead in the sweepers, because just when he thought he could get me on pure speed, he'd hit a storm sewer every time.

I was only beaten once—by a Chicano in a Chevy pickup full of lawn-care tools and pensive children. But the more typical locals drove like garden slugs. They weren't in cars. Their Panteras and Jensen-Healeys are not cars to them. They are investments or talismans or some foolish thing. They are what knowledge is to wise men or what a six-foot spray-painted initial on the side of a subway train is to a juvenile delinquent in the Bronx. These fellows might as well put wheels on their drug-soaked wives and roll blonds up and down the streets for all the driving ability they exhibit.

The Mustang had its purposes just sitting still, too. It was a perfect litmus test. Kind, good-natured, self-respecting, honest people loved it. Bad people were appalled by the thing. Almost everybody I saw was appalled by the thing. I repeat, the fancy-car owners of L.A. are sacks of night soil, human early warnings to call the Roto-Rooter man.

But there are *some* decent people in L.A. I know this because they do business with Rent-A-Wreck. It greatly increased my respect for Robin Williams to find he had rented a 1970 LeMans right before he got the lead in "Mork & Mindy." Robin decided the car brought him luck, so he let it sit for five months



in front of the television studio. You can rent this car today if Dave Schwartz likes you. Maybe you'll start making weird noises and lots of money. Other people who have rented from Dave include Alan Alda, Paul Newman, Judge John Sirica, Henry Fonda, Jeff Bridges, Garry Trudeau, Jill St. John, Roger McGuinn, and Tony Perkins—each of these people with a car perfectly suited to his or her nature. I wanted to know what Henry Fonda got. "A great big flatbed truck," was the answer. I am still pondering that.

Over the years, I've had the chance to ask a lot of people to name the best car in the world. The most frequent reply has been the 450-series Mercedes. I didn't expect to get that answer from Dave Schwartz, but I wasn't prepared for the answer I did get: "a 1969 Buick Skylark." I told him that could not possibly be true. He swore to me it is. His next favorites are '67 and '68 Mustangs with automatic transmissions, Sixties Plymouths with the 318 V-8, Darts with the slant six, Pintos (although he doesn't own any for the business because of the bad press they got from an occasional human pot roast), Mavericks, Oldsmobile Cutlasses, most 1970 through '74 full-sized American cars, anything from American Motors, and Mustang IIs. Looking over this list, it sounds like a ten-year-old boy's nightmare about what Dad's going to buy Mom for a second car. I like the stuff on the RAW lot, too, but Dave has reached some plane of automotive enlightenment I cannot approach. He claims his opinions are based on reliability, but I suspect him of a Buddha-like love of all carkind. And I know he loves swell cars, too, because he personally owns a 1967 Mercedes 250SE convertible, a 1950 Mercury, a '65 Porsche SC, and a 1976 Seville. But the last time I was at Rent-A-Wreck, I noticed that he went home in a 1960 Valiant. ●

