

hip to be square

YOUNGER DRIVERS TRICK OUT OLD MODELS AND MAKE THEM A HOT, NEW COMMODITY



PHOTO COURTESY OF RIDES MAGAZINE/TONY HARMER

It's pretty much every teenager's dream to come home from getting his or her driver's license and find a shiny, brand-new car waiting in the driveway. Or is it?

Today, some of the hippest wheels for big-city, under-30 drivers are older models commonly identified with seniors: Oldsmobiles, Buicks, Chevrolets and Cadillacs from the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s.

They're modifying these so-called "grandpa" cars with new or restored engines, large wheels, and shiny bright "candy" paint jobs, says Brian Scotto, editor in chief of *Rides* magazine and its new spinoff publication, *Donk, Box & Bubble*.

It's one of the most eye-catching trends in the used-car industry and it can mean big business for urban-based ISCs.

Southern roots

Scotto, speaking from a Milwaukee photo shoot for the second issue of the surprise hit, *Donk, Box & Bubble*, says the trend started in the Southern United States but has quickly spread throughout the rest of the country.

J.D. Power & Associates' Power Information Network reports that buyers aged 16 to 35 accounted for 56% of sales of 1982 Chevrolets last year. Similarly, the age group represented 46% of 1983 Chevrolet sales and 46% of 1986 Buick sales in 2005 as well.

The popular name for these souped-up "grandpa" cars is "boxes," which Scotto defines as a mid-80s ride with a boxy rear clip, like the Chevy Impala, Caprice or Monte Carlo. "Bubbles" are early '90s Impalas or Caprices with rounded front and rear ends, while "donks" are any mid-70s Caprice or Impala with a sloping tail.

"I've heard a number of explanations for how the term 'donk' came about, but most say it was originally shortened from 'donkey' because the Impala emblem — the antelope — looked like one," Scotto says.

"Donk"

BY SANDRA BECKWITH | PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY HARMER



“Donks, boxes and bubbles aren’t niche vehicles. These cars were mass produced. There are tens — if not hundreds — of thousands of them out there. Since they enjoyed gigantic production runs, there are many parts and accessories still available for them.” – Peter MacGillivray, SEMA VP of marketing

When it comes to donks, boxes and bubbles, everything has to be big. “Big has different meanings when referring to these vehicles,” says Daniel Perez, CEO and founder of MIA Entertainment Inc., which includes *King of the Street* magazine and East Coast Ryders. “Big can refer to size, but it also describes a flashy, wild and loud appearance.”

Vehicle availability also fuels the trend. “Donks, boxes and bubbles aren’t niche vehicles,” says Peter MacGillivray, vice president of marketing for the Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA). “These cars were mass produced. There are tens — if not hundreds — of thousands of them out there. Since they enjoyed gigantic production runs, there are many parts and accessories still available for them.”

ACDelco Total Service Support member George Bates says it’s easy to understand why these cars are popular with

today’s drivers. “They’re affordable, plentiful and can be easily modified,” says the owner of George Bates Automotive in Upland, Calif., who specializes in servicing Impalas.

He turns to the ACDelco Parts Catalog at acdelco.com and his local ACDelco WD, Kay Automotive, to find the numerous parts and products ACDelco carries for these vehicles. The GM Goodwrench Web site (gmgoodwrench.com) is another great resource for GM Restoration, Performance and Collision Parts.

Bates says working closely with a nearby body shop has helped him build up his Impala clientele. “The body shop handles modifying the exterior appearance, and we take care of the mechanical maintenance, repair and refurbishing,” he adds. “I’m also active in numerous Impala clubs. In fact, I traveled to Las Vegas in October for a show. They may not be 25 years old, but these Impalas are already classics.”

CREATING THE RIGHT LOOK

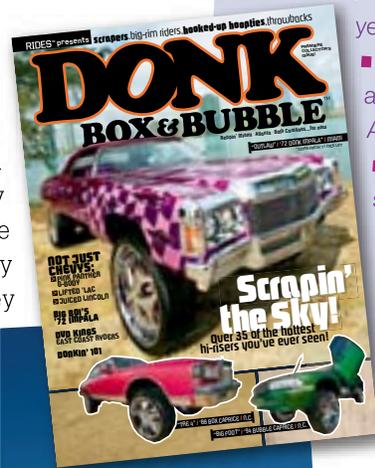
Some donk, box and bubble owners can pay as little as \$500 for their vehicles if they're lucky. The minimal investment means that instead of spending several hundred dollars on car payments each month they put their cash toward monthly upgrades, such as a dazzling new grille or fender flares.

Accessories and paint are chosen for their ability to add a unique look or to make a car stand out. Common modifications include the high-rise look, shiny or flake paints in bright colors like orange and lime green, flashy aesthetics (the checkered flame design popular in the South), stereo systems with several subwoofers in the trunk, and auto bodies that are "skinned" for a smooth look.

Donk, Box & Bubble's Scotto says the typical vehicle with rims and a flashy paint job costs around \$5,000. "Although I've seen extremists spend up to \$80,000," he adds.

Some donk, box and bubble owners handle vehicle repair and maintenance themselves, but the majority still takes their cars to ISCs.

Scotto says the potential for sales and service is higher with these cars than with others because owners are constantly modifying them. "We'll shoot a car for the magazine only to find out that it looks totally different six months later," he says. "They



keep changing the car to stay up with what's cool."

While it currently tends to be an urban trend, suburban shops can establish a reputation for doing good work on donks, boxes and bubbles and entice customers from neighboring cities.

set the trend

IDEAS ON HOW TO BUILD YOUR DONK, BOX AND BUBBLE BUSINESS

While donk, box and bubble vehicles may not be your thing, here are a few ideas for attracting their drivers to your shop:

- Learn about the category. Read magazines such as *Rides* and *Donk, Box & Bubble* (below) or view the "King of the Street" DVDs from East Coast Ryders. Check out donk, box and bubble shows listed on sites like carshownews.com, cardomain.com and eastcoastryders.com.
- Give owners a place to show off their cars by hosting a show or cruise night in your parking lot.
- Begin stocking the parts and accessories most in demand.

If you're not sure which products to carry because you aren't yet getting requests, talk to a few owners.

- Take advantage of the educational information and resources on the Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) Web site (sema.org).

- Be respectful. "Whether enthusiasts are into sports cars, off-roaders or donks, you want to show respect for their passion, even if it's not your flavor," says Peter MacGillivray, vice president of marketing for SEMA.

"Many entertainment and fashion trends start in pocket markets and become more widespread and mainstream as magazines and other media outlets report on the trend," SEMA's MacGillivray says. "That's what we're starting to see in this market. It's similar to the sport compact trend that started a decade ago in Southern California and is now a global business worth several billion dollars."

Shop owners outside urban locations that invest a little time now to learn more about the trend before it reaches their neck of the woods could have a competitive advantage over a competitor that didn't see this trend coming.

"The popularity of these cars will eventually reach suburban or small-town youth who inherit their grandfather's Buick LeSabre and want a customized look so that peers admire, not pity, them in the school parking lot," MacGillivray says. "ISCs that get into it now could be in for big sales later." ■