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Memory Lane

Deep in the heart of Nashville, there's a car museum with a strangely European flavour to it...

Words and photography: Nick Kurczewski





Above
Jeff Lane with
Little and Large: tiny
Scootacar and huge
LARC landing craft.

Home to countless honky-tonks and raucous country & western bars, in downtown Nashville the only thing that flows faster than beer is the sound of rapid-fire banjo playing, and the distinctive twang of a Tennessee accent. The Grand Ole Opry and the Country Music Hall of Fame are here. So are an inordinate amount of boot repair shops, and stores selling cowboy hats. You don't have to love country music to visit Nashville, but you better pretend to at least like it.

Four years attending university in a small Southern town prepared me for this music appreciation bluff. After all, my heart belongs to cars, not ballads about lost-loves or dearly departed hound dogs. The stranger a car is, the happier I am. I just never expected this automotive romance to lead here, to Nashville, the cradle of country music.

Only a few short miles from the city centre, housed in a low-lying, cream-coloured brick building, the Lane Motor Museum offers no clue as to the strange creations lurking within. Then again, the cyclops-eyed 1947 Tatra parked outside does hint that things are not as ordinary as they may appear to be. Jeff Lane and his wife Susan cheerily greet me at the front door and explain that, as the museum is closed for the day, we have free rein of Jeff's personal collection of over 280 vehicles. Most have names that sound more like ancient Eastern European fiefdoms than they do any car I've ever heard of. And did Jeff and Susan really say two-eight-zero?





DELWYN MALLETT

‘WE ALWAYS HAVE A LIST OF THE CARS WE’RE LOOKING FOR, BUT YOU CAN’T JUST GO BY A LIST. THINGS JUST POP UP’

The beginnings of Jeff’s automotive passion began humbly enough when, at the tender age of 13, he was bought an MG TD by his father. The car was complete, in that it was completely in pieces. Young Jeff set about rebuilding the TD and finished it in time for his driving test three years later. The following years marked the slow foundation of his collection. He’d buy a Citroën here, an MG there, and various micro-cars inbetween. As the numbers grew, so did his efforts to find stranger, rarer vehicles.

Until 2002, Jeff kept his cars in several locations scattered around Nashville. One day, his wife casually asked how many cars he thought he owned. His best guess was 25, maybe 30 at most. A careful search of each garage and warehouse uncovered over 75 vehicles – and an urgent need to find a proper home for them. ‘I didn’t want to be somebody who has 200 cars in a field,’ Jeff says.

Since the Lanes renovated this former Sunbeam bread factory four years ago, the collection has had the room to keep growing. Cars are divided by country, with separate sections for military vehicles, micro-cars, electric vehicles and several dozen motorcycles. There are no velvet ropes, barbed wire or electric fences to keep you from getting up close.

The museum’s website promises cars ‘from A to Z’ – notable exceptions currently being ‘E’ and ‘Q’. Jeff assures me he has some ideas to solve those alphabetical omissions. ‘We always have a list of the cars we’re looking for,’ he says, ‘but you can’t just go by a list. Things just pop up.’

Walking past a coal-powered 1938 Citroën, a row of Czech-built Tatras and a 1965 Peel P-50 (the world’s smallest car ever produced), Jeff admits that his unusual taste can be an asset. ‘The stuff we’re into, usually there’s not a great fight to get it,’ he says with a laugh.



Left

Pretty pre-war Aero is one of several Czech-built cars in this US collection.



Left and below

Jeff Lane fires up the 'Wind Wagon', and pilots the bizarre McQuay-Norris streamliner.



Above centre

Hideous Ultra Van RV is based on Chevrolet Corvair running gear.

Right

Truly massive LARC landing craft is 26 feet wide: Jeff drove it on the road once.



A mint 1975 Maserati Bora, a stunning 1936 Voisin C28 and an evil-looking 1990 Lancia Delta HF Integrale prove that Jeff is not completely averse to established classics. However, these relatively sane vehicles tend to be overshadowed by cars like a 1948 Davis Divan three-wheeler, a 1964 Amphicar, a 1928 Martin Aerodynamic car and a 1974 Faun Kraka – a jeep-like German military contraption that can be folded in half, then parachuted into combat. To have one Subaru 360 micro-car would be unusual. Jeff has four: a pick-up, a saloon and two vans.

Nearly everything is street-legal, ready to drive at a moment's notice. Jeff takes most of the collection out on public roads, or to a large parking lot behind the museum. And it is out back that Jeff has his biggest surprise.

The 1959 LARC [Lighter, Amphibious, Resupply, Cargo] LX is a 62-foot long landing-craft, once used by the US military to transport loads of up to 60 tons onto beaches. In January 2005 Jeff picked up his newly acquired LARC from the Port of Nashville, then drove it roughly five miles back to the museum with a police escort. Jeff says that manoeuvring the 26-foot wide behemoth through city streets was not too difficult. 'Of course, you couldn't see some things, like parked cars or one-story buildings.'


An air leak in the LARC's massive plumbing and four Detroit Diesel engines curtail his plan to let me take it for a spin. A fix is coming, as Jeff wants to use the LARC to run over a junked car during one of the museum's many special event days, where visitors get to see the cars in action.

After the LARC, anything seems normal. Somehow, Jeff is able to top it, via a homemade, propeller-driven car dubbed 'The Wind Wagon'. Built in 1929 by a teenager, this mad device is powered by a Harley-Davidson engine, hanging high above a spindly chassis. A few adjustments to the

carburettor, and with a flick of the propeller blade the Wagon explodes into a fury of smoke and sound that makes the meanest muscle-car seem effete. Aft of the driver is a passenger seat – an ancient folded tin sign and two metal foot pegs. I hop on and Jeff guns the hand throttle.

Over the next few hours all journalistic professionalism goes out the window. Jeff's enthusiasm is infectious. Jumping from car to car, I feel like a giddy teenager whose pal has the coolest garage in the world. Off the museum floor comes a buzzy little 1959 Scootacar, the sunshine-yellow 1948 Davis Divan, and the out-of-this-world 1934 McQuay-Norris Streamliner. Based on the mechanicals of a Ford Model A, the McQuay is easy to drive as long as you don't mind the interior ergonomics of an Earth-bound blimp.

A spot behind the wheel of a 1962 Alvis Stalwart proves that even a six-wheeled, former British military amphibious vehicle can be a cinch to manoeuvre – considering it's a six-wheeled, amphibious military vehicle – and the day winds down with a drive in a ratty looking yet mechanically perfect Honda S600 coupé, a Chevrolet Corvair-based RV called the Ultra Van, and a Tommi Makinen-edition Mitsubishi Evo. Head spinning, with a goofy grin tattooed on my face, I finally say good-bye to Jeff, Susan and the Lane Motor Museum only when we run out of daylight.

Music City it might be, but for me Nashville is now synonymous with the most extraordinary collection of cars I've ever experienced. There must be a song in there, somewhere. What rhymes with Tatra? 

» The Lane Motor Museum is at 702 Murfreesboro Pike, Nashville, TN37210, and is open most Thursdays to Mondays inclusive. Visit www.lanemotormuseum.org or call +1 615 742 7445.