

# Car fan holds one of the first big-scale Japanese shows in U.S.

By Matt Nauman  
Mercury News  
San Jose Mercury News

Article Launched:06/15/2007 01:38:27 AM PDT

Sure, Japanese cars are sales successes. Toyota outsold General Motors in the first quarter of 2007 worldwide, after all. Vehicles from Toyota, Honda, Subaru and others continue to do very well on quality surveys from J.D. Power & Associates and Consumer Reports.

But as objects of desire, as chattel for collectors, they've been ignored, avoided, unloved.

David Swig wants to change that.

Next month, he'll stage Motoring J Style, a Japanese car show at the Solano County Fairgrounds in Vallejo. He describes it as the "first comprehensive Japanese car show in the United States. It will be an extremely significant advancement for the blossoming Japanese collector car hobby."

He envisions himself as something of a facilitator for what he calls "a disorganized society."

On one hand, there are the "older guys" - Swig is 22 and a recent graduate of Santa Clara University - in their 30s, 40s and 50s, who collect older Datsun and Toyota models. On the other hand is the "tuner crowd," those in their late teens and 20s who grew up in "The Fast & The Furious" world and personalize Hondas, Scions and other Japanese models.

Both groups share something besides their love of Japanese machines: "They've never been accepted as part of the traditional collector car world," Swig said.

## Car show no-show

Indeed, take a look at the big Northern California car events. The tony Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance, which celebrates its 57th anniversary on Aug. 19, has never had a Japanese car as an entrant. (Lexus has shown concept cars there, but Toyota pays for that privilege as an event sponsor.)

The Goodguys organization, which stages hot-rod shows around the country, including four each year in Pleasanton, emphasizes that many of its events feature "all years, makes and models of American powered cars and trucks."

"For anybody who plays with Porsches, Ferraris, Alfas, Fords or Chevys, there's always been this stigma attached to the Japanese (cars)," Swig said. "You show up in Monterey in an old '73 Corolla SR-5, and people are going to look at you like who the hell are you."

Swig could have had that bias, too. He is the son of longtime San Francisco car dealer and collector Martin Swig. The father stages the annual California Mille event where classic cars drive the back roads of Northern California. This year, 67 cars joined the Mille - none were Japanese.

David Swig and his brother Howard, a 19-year-old University of Michigan student also working on the Motoring J Style event, grew up around these vintage and classic cars, mostly European models but also some American classics.

David Swig's first car was an Alfa-Romeo Milano. But as he raced and auto-crossed it, he noticed most others were driving Japanese cars, such as Mazda Miatas and Toyota MR-2s.

In the end, he and his brother started buying and driving these cars. They'll bring 10 or 12 models from their personal collection to Motoring J Style.

That includes a 1972 Datsun 510 done in the style of a Trans-Am racer, a 1968 Toyota Corona hardtop with only 26,000 miles and another Corona hardtop, but this one an over-the-top hot rod stuffed with a Lexus V-8 engine.

They'll also show a 1958 Toyota Toyopet Crown, perhaps the first Japanese model sold in the Bay Area and one of only 258 sold in the United States that year. It has been owned by their father, a former Toyota and Datsun dealer among other brands, since the 1980s.

Ronald Peterson of San Jose will be bringing his '67 Datsun RL411 SSS sedan to the event. "He rescued it from a Datsun junkyard and now takes it everywhere, including camping at 10,000 feet on 4x4 roads in the Sierra," Swig said.

Steve Kopito of Chatsworth will be bringing a very rare car, a 1965 Toyota Publica, which wasn't sold in the United States.

Kopito, who ironically exports U.S. auto parts to Japan, brought two Publica models to the United States about six years ago. He says four exist in the United States now; "the other two are in junkyards."

### **Company museum**

Why a Publica, which he described as "cheap, light, the Japanese Volkswagen Beetle per se?" Kopito says, "I just tend to like stuff that nobody else has."

Kopito is very involved with Southern California's Toyota Owners and Restorers Club ([www.toyotaclub.com](http://www.toyotaclub.com)), which just staged its 12th annual Toyotafest in May aside the Queen Mary in Long Beach. It attracted about 350 cars and several thousand spectators.

Swig said Motoring J Style will draw about 200 to 250 cars, and about 5,000 people.

He also hopes it becomes an annual event, and will eventually make money, something that won't happen with the inaugural affair.

Toyota, which celebrates its 50th anniversary in the United States in 2007, is "very pleased to see the emerging interest in historically significant Japanese cars," said spokesman Mike Michels. "There are certainly a growing number of enthusiasts, events and clubs following them."

The company has a museum at its Torrance headquarters - not open to the public, but available for group tours and events - with 100 significant vehicles, including three mid-'60s 2000 GT sports cars. The collection also includes a 1958 Toyopet Crown, a 1966 Toyota Corona, a 1971 Toyota Crown and a 1961 Land Cruiser, said curator Susan Sanborn.

### **A growing trend**

Keith Martin, who chronicles the world's auto auctions through his Sports Car Market magazine, expects the trend of Japanese collector cars to grow.

"So many of these Japanese cars disintegrated and fell off the face of the earth that the few that are left from that era are starting to attract a lot of attention," he said. "It's not because they were great collector cars or high-performance machinery. It's kind of like flipping through a family album and reliving your youth when the only car you could afford was something built by Toyota."

Swig has seen prices of certain older, rarer Japanese models growing on Web sites such as craigslist and eBay. "Cars are bringing good money - more money than you'd think," he said.

A Datsun 510 reached \$27,600 on eBay recently, he said, and the owner refused the bid.

---

Contact Matt Nauman at [mnauman@mercurynews.com](mailto:mnauman@mercurynews.com) or (408) 920-5701.

Close Window

Send To Printer