



• "Hey, just for the record, what the hell kind of car is this?"

"Uh . . . what do you mean?"

"Just what I said. What kind of car is this? Like, is it a Ford or a Plymouth or what?"

"Gee, now that you mention it, I don't really know."

"You don't know!"

"Well . . . it's my wife's car."

"You mean because it's your wife's car you don't know what kind it is? How long have you had it?"

"Oh . . . a year or so, I guess. What the hell are you driving at?"

I decided I was getting into murky waters and that I'd better ease out of the goo before it got too thick. We were booming along the San Diego Freeway, just one more jot in an endless river of whistling metal.

"I think it's a Dodge."

I peered at the anonymous molded foam dash which looked exactly like all the other anonymous molded foam dashes.

"Nah. I don't think so," he muttered as we slid down an exit ramp.

"Not a Dodge?" I chirped, tightening my shoulder harness and keeping my head low, ready for anything.

"Nah. I think it's a Polara. Yeah, that's right. I remember now. It's a Polara."

This little incident, which happened just the way I've told it, word for word, has been festering in my mind for a long time now. *It's not a Dodge . . . it's a Polara.* I knew there was something significant there and now I think I've finally got the answer.

I am about to formulate a theorem, which is something I've always wanted to do since that hellish year when I almost flunked Geometry II. Ready, class? Naturally, this will appear on the final, so you'd better take notes. Henceforth this will be known as *Shepherd's Theorem Of Disappearing Manufacturers, or What The Hell Kind Of Car Was That Anyway?*

It is my conviction that today there are millions of Americans—otherwise moder-

ately intelligent citizens who have the franchise to vote—who have not the foggiest idea of who the devil made their car, and if you challenge them on it they'd think you were some kind of "technical nut." We really don't have Fords, Plymouths, Chevrolets, Dodges or Mercurys. Instead we have Cougars, Galaxies, Chargers, Dusters, Roadrunners, Barracudas and who-knows-what, the whole menagerie that has somehow escaped from a vast episode of "The World Of Disney." The mind-numbing sameness of the vast majority of junk pouring out of Detroit has become so epidemic that I'm beginning to wonder whether secretly Ford, Chrysler, GM and AMC merged about four years ago and one guy is designing them all. There are a lot of signs that the slope-heads who buy these things are dimly aware that something is missing. Everything else you buy in our world comes festooned with big fat trademarks which are printed sometimes even in day-glo colors. Soaps, detergents, toothpastes, beers are all alike—they really lay that trademark out. There's no way you can mistake a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon for a Bud. And for curious reasons, people really dig brand names. These reasons are beyond the scope of this column, but it seems to be true.

Detroit is the single exception. You have to get right next to any "unit," and let's face it, that's what they are, walk around it a couple of times, peer closely at the hubcaps, the hood and the deck lid to figure out just what the hell it is, and even then you strike

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9

out if that cheesy little decal that says "Duster" was flushed down the drain at the local automatic car wash.

To disguise this curious identity effacement, the manufacturers have taken to offering as "luxury options" silly pseudo-heraldic radiator ornaments, tinny sad fake "spoilers," foam padded "racing wheels" and on and on and on. The basic fact remains that these things are about as alike as the guys who drive them.

Yet the inexplicable urge remains in the breast of numerous Archie Bunkers to tell the world what he is. This has led to some really strange things, not the least of which is the current, and growing, sale of giant decals, often covering the entire back window, proclaiming to the world the owner's individuality by driving a FORD/PLYMOUTH/PONTIAC/CHEVY/DODGE.

I state categorically that this idiotic trend has great significance for the future of Detroit. I believe that one of the major reasons that the VW had such dramatic success in our country in the past was because there was no way to hide the fact that it was a VW. And there was nothing else that even remotely looked like it, drove like it, or even sounded like it. Many of the people who bought it originally liked to think of themselves as "different" from the ordinary run of lemmings; more sensitive, more deeply concerned, truly intellectual, etc. There was a secret sense of satisfaction in going against the grain, and when they met one another on the street they'd beep (VW horns really do beep), wave to each other in silent salute, members of a special extra-beautiful clan. However, it was this very success that has finally killed the VW mystique. The very uniqueness that a VW once conferred on its owner has now become numbing anonymity. The Bug is now as plentiful as Coke cans, hence those seekers after truth and beauty are now looking elsewhere. Now every Associate Professor drives something, *anything*, Japanese.

VW, in its frantic convulsions to recoup its lost mystique, has come up with one of the oddest ironies of our time: the so-called "The Thing." To make it in 1973, they have reinvented a World War II Wehrmacht Jeep. They'd have a real winner if they went all the way and offered as an option genuine unit numbers and a classy Wehrmacht desert paint job with fake bullet holes.

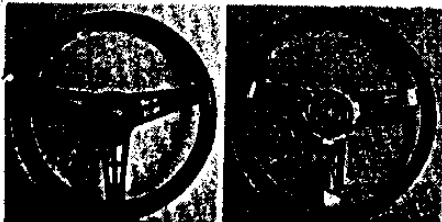
On the home front, there have been some strange developments too, particularly noticeable in the TV commercials extolling various Detroit beauties. They have totally given up trying to explain why their car is better than the other guy's. Since we all know now, secretly, whether we admit it or not, that they're all damn near alike, now people are seen selecting cars wearing blindfolds, which I maintain is a Freudian slip. And like all Freudian slips has spilled the beans. You *can* buy a car blindfolded and do just as well as the guy walking around the lot with his contacts wide open. Other commercials feature sincere-looking Archie Bunker types earnestly telling you as they drive why they bought their second Razzmobile without any hesitation.

"Them guys don't gimme a fast shuffle. When they tell ya they're gonna fix something, why, they actually really do, and the service is great. Like, it's really great . . ."

Nowhere is there any mention of the car itself, just something called "Service."

The final statement of this obscurantism now has a commercial that is all about how the commercial was made, a whole big brouhaha about how this guy gets a cat to squat on top of a Cougar (Mercury, you boob). This one barely even shows the car at all and probably was shot at the Disney studios in Burbank.

It's very easy, in fact too easy, to blame Detroit for all this, but I suspect that the rea-



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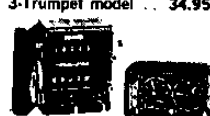
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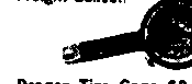
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son for the deadening sameness of many things in today's life stems from the simple fact that most people (and I mean *most* people) have a great fear of appearing "different." There is a little of that in all of us. It's not easy for a 16-year-old to admit to his friends that he just doesn't dig Rock and so he trots along meekly with the crowd to the next big \$12.50 per ticket rip-off and pretends. His father is no different when he drives his new car into the lot at the plant.

However, there are signs that the search for identity which has been going on with growing intensity is beginning to pop out in curious places. But the fads remain. Jogging is out; tennis is in. Bicycles were in and are now showing signs of tapering off. But that great mastodon, the Detroit aircraft carrier-style car, goes on.

This total sameness in the automobile world has caused a little embarrassment among people who claim expertise in cars. I suppose I shouldn't put this down for the record, but it actually happened. A group of *Car and Driver* staffers, including Bob Brown, our respected and feared editor, were standing around on a New York street on the East Side, watching the traffic struggle by. It suddenly occurred to at least three of us almost simultaneously that we couldn't give certain identification to the cars without deep study. It was a moment of grim truth for all of us.

But the car, as a means by which the owner can express some deep psychic longing, is still a valid medium. However, the manufacturers are conspiring to make it harder and harder for the great pulsating mass to identify with individual marques. I can remember when whole afternoons could be devoted to the defense of whatever make you were driving at the moment, in the face of sarcastic insults from your friends. You were either a "Ford man" or a "Chevy man," with loyalties that were passed down from one generation to another like preferences in beer or cigarettes.

Maybe that's why there is a current craze for junkers from the Forties and Fifties. Let's face it, a Studebaker, particularly the one with those damn propellers on the beak, looked like what it was. I've even thought from time to time that maybe all this disappearing automotive individuality might be an unconscious form of defense on the part of the manufacturers. For the last five or six years the onslaught of criticism directed at the Detroit biggies: GM, Ford, Chrysler, has risen to a flood tide. Maybe they are withdrawing into a subconscious shroud of commitment which makes it virtually impossible to tell a Ford from a GM product so that no one stands out to be shot down. They prefer not to make Fords or Chevys or Plymouths, but just "cars." In that they're no different from most of the rest of us, who desire to hide and yet make it big. Soon there won't be any names, just Hertz cars or Avis cars in four or five different flavors. ●