

## THE EMANCIPATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL

*One of the finest special sports cars ever built in Australia — the Prad Alta, end product of the fertile team of Clive Adams, Stan Brown and Jack Pryor. Power came from 200 bhp Alta.*

# GOOD THINGS STILL COME IN GLASS

By BILL TUCKEY

YOU can advance a lot of evidence why special-building is a dying art in Australia, but you will be well wide of the mark. It has simply taken different forms. Not least of all is the social and economic one, the steady rise in the level of affluence, the emergence of the younger consumer as a force in the economy. What this means is that the young enthusiast has more money these days, and when he can buy, say, a Sprite for less than \$400 deposit and four years to pay, he no longer has the incentive to build his own car because he can't afford to buy one.

On top of this, of course, the growth of specialist used sports car yards, offering good units at reasonable prices, has brought more and better sports cars onto the market. Additionally, the mushrooming growth of hot rodding has attracted a lot of enthusiasts who would otherwise build sports car specials, simply because a rod is cheaper and easier to build and is not confined by the elementals of design that are essential with a sports or GT car.

So the days of the special are numbered in Australia. Or are they? In fact, there are a lot of new names springing up — fibreglass body makers, kit suppliers, builders of hot little sports racing cars, chassis specialists and so on. The old names of Buchanan, JWF and Nota are being dimmed by names like Bolwell, Competition Cars

with their U2, Henry Nehrybecki's Lolita title, and the VW-based Geneer. No, special building is not dying. It is simply taking different forms.

Ten years ago the specialist shops in the special business aimed high. They wanted volume sales for kit or fully-built cars, working on the assumption that Australians would pay relatively high prices for all-Australian cars. They came up with good and bad cars — good ones like the Buckle and Buchanan Cobra, poor ones like the Tontala. When those ideas slowed down, generally because of under-capitalisation, they turned to selling fibreglass body shells or kit cars. The shells were designed to fit on Holden, MG or Zephyr chassis.

All of these, with the exception of the Buckle, were mainly road cars. They were road cars because they could not then compete with the sports racing cars in open classes. But as motor racing grew, and there came classes that separated the marque sports cars from the rockets, or kept aside the clubman-type cars, the demand switched to the lightweight sports/racing car. So up came things like the Nota, the Stan Brown Lotus-like clubmans, and others. An additional spur to this change of pace was the increasing availability of suitable power plants — engines like the 105 E Anglia, the BMC A and B series, and the Hillman Imp.

The future is slowly brightening again for the special makers. But how many, oh, how many were trampled underfoot. The names are many, for at various stages in the last 10 years it seemed that everybody wanted to get into the business of building a sports or GT car for volume sales, with a VW/Holden/Zephyr base.

A lot of people lost a lot of money in the business. Nat Buchanan who tried for years to crack the market, finally gave it away. Bill Buckle said to us only the other day that he had been in the motor industry for 15 years and was only just starting to make money. Bill Buckle is now selling Toyota and running a big right hand drive conversion business, but he was behind the fabulous Buckle GT coupe and the Australian manufacture of fibreglass Goggomobiles. Stan Brown, certainly the best aluminium craftsman in Australia, with a training from Lotus, now builds more boats than cars. This is a long way from the era of 1955 to 1960, when from his workshops, sometimes in conjunction with Clive Adams and Stan Pryor, rolled the finest hand-made cars we have ever seen.

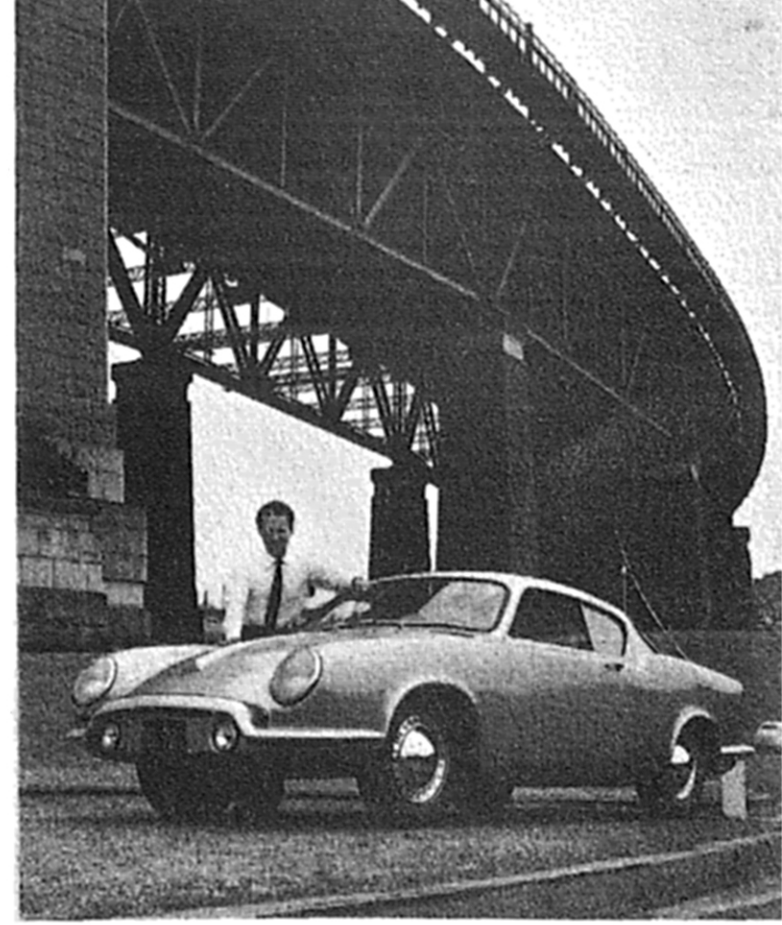
One of the first names in the volume special market was the Tontala. Built by the Tontala Motor Company, of Canterbury, Victoria, this glass-fibre Holden-based coupe was the sensation of the 1955 Melbourne Motor Show. The moulds for the body had been completed in October, 1954, and the car, to sell then for \$2800 (£1400) as a kit, had 90 bhp pulling 17½ cwt. The head of the company was Tony Theiler, but while a number of orders were taken at the show, not enough capital backing was available to enable production to go on.

In 1955 also Bill Buckle completed the prototype of his Buckle coupe. In more primitive form than his final production cars, it was built around a Ford Zephyr engine and gearbox, Zephyr wheels, rear axle and brakes. The boxed steel chassis, transverse leaf front suspension, leaf spring rear, body and furnishings were all to come from Buckle's works. What we saw then was a 17 cwt two-plus-two GT coupe only 4 ft 2 ins. high overall. But it had enormous potential.

Production was slow in getting underway, but by 1957 there were dozens of them on the road. The 1958 car was probably the finest. Selling complete then for \$3900 (£1950), it was beautifully finished and equipped with leather-covered steering wheel, electric door locks, clock, tachometer, full set of gauges, electric windscreen wipers, map light and a folding rear seat that opened onto the big boot. With a 15-gallon fuel tank and three-speed gearbox with overdrive, it would pull 115 mph in its final 95 bhp form, and run from 0-50 in 7.8 secs and 0-90 in 30.8. Buckle raced one car for three years with great success, and several are still racing in Sydney.

The Buckle was indisputably the finest low-volume all-Australian sports car ever conceived; it is one of the tragedies of the automobile business that if Bill Buckle had delayed the car until 1965, he would be selling them by the hundreds right now. It was a classic case of a man well ahead of his time.

From 1956 to 1960 were the golden years of Australian special building. The motor magazines of those years were full of do-it-yourselfers on special building, as well as feature articles on well-done cars that had just been finished. You could build a special for anything from \$200 (£100) up to \$4000 (£2000). One car was built from an Oakland chassis, an elderly V-8 engine and aircraft fuel tanks; it cost \$200 (£100). At the end of the 1955 Sydneysider Ash Marshall, now the country's ace drag racer, completed a beautiful Holden special with an English-made body and astonishing performance. Using Holden, Peugeot and Morris bits, it still cost him \$3500 (£1750). But in 1958 in Australia you could buy



*The short-lived Ascort, a well-conceived idea for a local GT built around VW Okrasa components. It was to sell for around \$4000 complete.*



*The prototype Buckle, first shown in 1955. While body outline remained the same, changes were made to frontal treatment, roof and interior.*

a ready-built new tube chassis for Holden or MG parts for \$130 (£65) plus a works crossmember. Glass bodies were then \$300 (£150) for the basic shell of \$800 (£400) for the fully-fitted unit.

The basic body that probably outsold all the others in those days was the Buchanan. Ready for sale in 1957, it came from Nat Buchanan, who was then associated with Warnefords in Ford engine modifications. It was a one-piece body in fibreglass, with separately moulded doors,

