



The Unlikely Hybrid

EVER WONDER ABOUT AFTER-HOURS PROJECTS FROM WITHIN THE WALLS OF WEISSACH? STYLIST TONY LAPINE CAME UP WITH ONE: AN MG INFUSED WITH GERMAN KNOW-HOW
STORY BY PETER LINSKY PHOTOS BY PETER LINSKY UNLESS NOTED

Parked among hundreds of gleaming, full-race Porsches in the paddock at Rennsport Reunion II last April was a rather strange interloper. Several passers-by were heard to say, "What is *that* doing *here*?"

That — which was parked alongside Bata Mataja's race-car transporter at Daytona International Speedway — was a 1949 MG-TC. Bata Mataja, a life-long Porsche fan, explains that the little MG has earned its right to park among Stuttgart's finest because a certain amount of Porsche blood flows through its metal veins. We're all used to the idea of a Porsche drivetrain propelling an old Elva, Lotus, Bobsy, or the like — to say nothing of more recent Lola, March, and

Fabcar racers — but is a Porsche-powered MG street car really appropriate in the paddock at Rennsport Reunion?

Before you jump to the conclusion that Mataja's TC has a 944 under its bonnet or a flat six in its tail, consider this: When the little green car was about 25 years old, it came into the possession of an individual who both understood its attraction (classic pre-war British roadster lines) as well as its weaknesses (pretty much everything mechanical and electrical) and had ready access to the resources necessary to turn the little ragtop into something far more reliable. And far faster, too. He also brought a great deal of creativity to the table.

That individual was Tony Lapine (pro-

nounced *la-peen*), who ran Porsche's Design Department. Lapine, now 75, is comfortably retired in Germany after a brilliant career. His first major project at Porsche was the 1973 Carrera RS; his last was the famed 959 all-wheel-drive supercar. He is perhaps best known for fathering the 928 — 1978 European "Car Of The Year" and winner of the Style Auto Trophy. It's also a car that many still consider to be the finest Grand Tourer ever built. His legacy, however, may be as a staunch advocate of continuing the venerable 911 at a time when management was ready to retire the design.

So how did this faithful Porsche artist, architect, and engineer acquire a rickety old MG, only to spend considerable

amounts of time and effort transforming it into a favored toy? For an answer, let's turn to his youngest son, Hans — who is currently the chief modeler for VW-Audi in Simi Valley, California — and an attentive Bata Mataja, who recently purchased the car from the Lapines.

"My father was born in Riga, Latvia," begins Hans. "But he fled ahead of the German and Soviet armies at end of the war." He lived in an Allied refugee camp long enough to learn English from a British Army officer. A quick study, the elder Lapine soon spoke six or seven languages. While attending automotive engineering school in Hamburg, he spotted a TC at a sports-car dealership. Smitten with its flowing fenders and big wire wheels, Hans' father was hooked in by the small British car. Says Hans: "My dad turned to a friend and said, 'I'm going to have one of those someday.'"

Lapine landed a job at Style Porsche in 1969 working under F.A. Porsche. In 1971, he became the Chief of Styling — a position he held until his retirement in

1989. Tony had to wait 30 years for his chance to buy "just the right MG-TC." And it took a year of searching. One winter night in the mid-1970s, recalls Hans, Tony and eldest son Klaus began talking about such a project, which led to the purchase of the MG. "He bought it soon after the car arrived from England. It was original, with a 1250-cc four-cylinder OHV engine and a four-speed crash box. Its previous owner had installed ambulance lights for turn signals."

Lapine didn't even bother to drive the car. The entire family — Tony, his wife Jeanette, Klaus, Hans, and daughter Inge — immediately went to work disassembling it at their home in Grafenau, near Weissach. It took all of a weekend. Father and sons did the heavy lifting, while Inge tagged and bagged all the pieces Tony planned to keep. Most of the MG's mechanical components, however, were junked.

Klaus became the Project Leader, with Tony offering guidance. It should be noted at this point that Tony was not a hands-off

manager. In fact, Lapine had already spent countless hours after work at his drawing board, laying out exactly what he wanted to create out of the old British roadster. It was something quite different than MG's engineers had in mind.

Starting with the basics, Tony had Porsche Style fabricator Armin Altmann box the MG's frame rails for additional strength and torsional rigidity. The talented Altmann also performed all of the other metalwork. Says Hans: "His work was always better than you wanted...he was one of the finest craftsmen out there."

Son Klaus and father Tony rebuilt the body monocoque with new wood framing where needed. Most of the original sheetmetal was okay, but Altmann had to refabricate a new right front fender. "We did the body quickly; then it sat in the hallway of our house and was used as a coat-hanger and dog bed."

Tony and Klaus spent many hours on the project. Says Hans: "My father engineered many new pieces. He realized the TC was not a very good sports car;



Lapine made regular appearances with his MG/Fiat/Porsche hybrid in vintage racing, hillclimbs, and tours—often on some of Europe's most famous courses (1) and against unlikely rivals (4). The MG was far quicker for its Italian engine and running gear (2) and more reliable, too—enough so that Lapine drove the car to work regularly. Here, he's seen talking to Helmuth Bott—sitting in the 928 that Lapine penned (3)—outside the gates of Weissach.



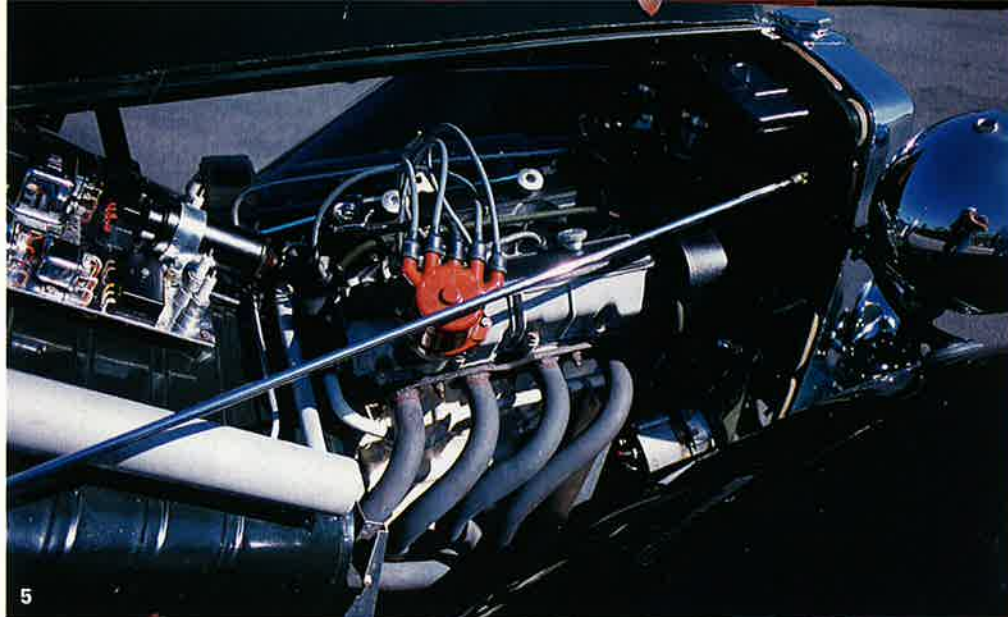
PHOTO THIS PAGE: MATAJA COLLECTION

Fiat 124 Spyder engine fits under the TC's bonnet gracefully—in both mechanical and visual terms (5). A perfect melding of the MG and Fiat logos (6) with a play on MG's marketing slogan were added to a custom ram-air tube for the Webers. Speedometer-tachometer combo (7) was another Lapine touch, produced by VDO based on his drawings. 917 pedal cluster and 906 steering shaft were handy materials then, a trick but subtle detail today...

that is, it wasn't quick or reliable." Those issues prompted the senior Lapine to install an entirely different engine and drivetrain. The motor came from a Fiat 124 sports car, which Klaus salvaged from a wrecking yard. "Dad had raced an Alfa Giulietta in the U.S. in the late 1950s. He'd looked at various engine possibilities, including the Alfa, an MG Twin-Cam, and even a Lotus-Ford. He chose the Fiat 124 because of its aesthetics. It was the most fragile-looking twin-cam out there and it matched the car. It's a late 1960s engine of 1438-cc displacement, a very compact unit that fits neatly under the MG's narrow bonnet."

The elder Lapine picked up a pair of dual-choke 40 DCOE Webers with a matching manifold, then fabricated custom headers and a racing exhaust. In the Porsche tradition, the motor mounts were drilled to save a bit of weight. The stock TC radiator works fine, says Hans, but it was a challenge to find hoses that would mate it to the new engine. The five-speed Fiat gearbox received custom ratios, but the stock Fiat clutch was retained. The rear axle is stock Alfa Giulietta fare with its offset driveshaft, so the floor tunnel and seat bottom had to be modified to make it fit the old MG's chassis. The Alfa parts car also donated its axle hubs and a set of wide, finned drum brakes. 10-inch, twin-shoe Veloce gear is up front with standard Giulietta bits in the rear. The brakes are an inch larger in diameter and twice as wide as the TC's, by the way. Additional ventilating holes were drilled in the drums and covered with mesh screen — a common racing practice of the period.

These were Big Brakes long before they were in vogue, as was the idea of making a British roadster with modern mechanicals and Germanic know-how. The 19-inch wheels Lapine decided to order for his MG sound pretty ahead of their time, too, but it should be noted that large-diameter wheels were available in the old days. If their diameter sounds exotic, don't get too excited. These 19-inch Borrani are only four inches wide!



For racing and competition purposes, Lapine had a set of 16x5-inch wheels. Today, the 19s wear Riden vintage racing tires, rated to 130 mph.

All of those pieces, notes son Hans, were appropriate to the period: "Dad wanted to build his own car. Keeping it OE was not an option in this case. He didn't care what others thought of the car. To his mind, he was improving it. That was the most important thing."

So it was inevitable that at least some Porsche blood would find its way into this strange little car. To start with, it's the only MG-TC on earth with a Porsche 917

pedal cluster! There's also a 917 transmission oil cooler and the steering rack and steering shaft came from a 906. Dashboard switchgear also comes courtesy of the 906. "Those old pieces were just lying around the shop," says Hans.

Armin also crafted a neat cold-air ram tube for the Webers, with Tony's tongue-in-cheek "Safety Fast At Last" slogan painted thereon to poke fun at MG's famous marketing pitch. The air inlet is covered by a brass mesh screen, and that in turn by a thin, elasticized cloth imprinted with the "Porsche" name to serve as a filter of sorts. To the casual



Current custodian Bata Mataja drives Tony Lapine's pet project to work—a 130-mile round trip! He loves the TC's character and performance, thanks to its many mods...

observer, it's the only hint that something unusual lurks beneath.

"My dad," chuckles Hans, "intended it to be a sleeper, that others shouldn't see what's in there." Bata Mataja has removed the side hood panels because he *does* want others to see what's in there — and he likes the 1950s-racer, open-hood, leather-strap look.

Elsewhere on the car, the Prince of Darkness has been forever banished. All the electrics were upgraded to Bosch bits, with Hella supplying the lamps. The original Armstrong lever shocks were rebuilt and do a reasonable job of controlling the semi-elliptic springs at both ends. Inside, take a close look at the combination speedometer/tachometer; Lapine engineered a new instrument face.

"He wanted to know his speeds in gears for fourth and fifth," says Hans today. So the elder Lapine laid out the gauge face on his drafting table, then had VDO produce it. The interior was reupholstered in light green leather.

The entire project went quickly, says Hans, because his father did all the work on paper first. Tony wanted to tour, rally, and race the car, so he fabricated a removable roll bar and installed aircraft seatbelts. It also had a set of period-correct Brooklands racing windscreens. Among the thick folio of photographs and drawings that Hans

has passed on to Mataja are images of Tony running the car at the Salzburgring, Nurburgring, Silverstone, Spa, and Hockenheim circuits — plus the Colmar-Berg contest and other hillclimbs. "Racing was a big family deal," notes Hans.

The Lapine TC Special was occasionally banned by European vintage event organizers, apparently unaware that old MGs modified with other engines were commonly raced in America back in the 1950s and are welcomed today. Hans says his father — with a background of racing 356 Carreras, Alfa Giuliettias, Lotus 23s, Lola Mk 1s, and the like — was quite successful. But Hans says his mother actually has more trophies than Tony. She's raced a variety of cars — learning how to drive fast on Michigan's frozen lake courses in the 1950s!

Following his retirement, Tony Lapine gave the MG to Klaus, who had moved back to the U.S. He eventually sent the car to Hans in California "for caretaking." After cruising the Caribbean for nine years in his 1938 Dutch-built sailboat, Klaus opened up a gourmet restaurant in South Carolina and told Hans to find a buyer who would appreciate the car. "It was important that the new owner understood what went into this car," recalls Hans.

Hans asked around and eventually was introduced to Bata Mataja, who prepares cars for television and movies. Mataja owns a collection of Porsches and other interesting cars and enjoys vintage racing a pair of 356s. After get-

ting a call from Hans, Mataja drove out to look at the MG. And, after hearing about its provenance, Mataja knew he wanted to buy it. As in immediately.

First, however, he had to clear it with his wife, Rose. Fortunately, after 35 years of marriage, she tolerates his passion for cars. Bata and son Branden picked the MG up on a Saturday. It was in "dry pack" but not running, he remembers. "The car was complete with all its documents and preserved very well." A thorough cleaning was required, along with a change of fluids, a tune-up, and a brake check. The water pump and hoses were replaced, as well. After experiencing some trouble putting the shifter in reverse, his shop enlarged the reverse slot on the Lapine-built shift gate to allow for more complete engagement, and the problem disappeared.

A trial run on the freeway delighted Mataja, although a lack of seatbelts — the belts and roll bar would be delivered later — left him airborne on occasion when the car met road irregularities.

"It's the most fun to drive of any car I own," smiles Mataja, who has begun using the MG as a daily driver from his home to his shop, a 130-mile round trip commute. With top and windscreen down, this little mongrel is probably capable of 100 mph or better. But Mataja says he's not into wearing goggles and collecting bugs with his teeth. Still, he says, it's a ball to cruise at 75, returning the waves of other motorists who smile and offer a thumbs-up.

Most car enthusiasts can rationalize their hobby, but Mataja believes that The Fates intervened in his case. Walking around the car, he recites some pertinent dates: The TC was delivered from the factory September 16, 1949. His son was born in September; his daughter's birthday is on a 16th, and his own birth year was 1949. Lapine designed the Porsche 928, and Bata sees that as an omen. His son's birthday is 9-28. And then there are the MG's German license tags: BBAD-49. Mataja's business is named B.A.D. Company, which stands for Big American Dreams Company. Too many coincidences. Everything clicked.

"It was meant for me to take care of this important car," reasons Mataja with a grin. Not own it, he points out, but to be its custodian. Says the effervescent Mataja: "Everybody likes to express themselves in different ways. This is how I express myself. When you can make a connection with different people who all love cars, I'm in heaven."

And *that's* probably the same way Tony Lapine felt about it. ■