



COWBOYS AND ENGINES

At a time when racing was a home for heroes, Texan renegade Carroll Shelby stood out as a driver of incredible daring and skill. Then he began a new project: building the car that would take on Ferrari

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OF COURSE, IT WAS a whole lot different back then. It was an era of aristocratic playboys and gentlemen racers, of mustachioed mavericks and double-barrelled daredevils, of men who lived to go faster and faster. It was a time of racing finesse, of the poetry of close driving and courageous overtaking, of pre-race tipples and post-race handshakes. The Fifties were about Grand Prix racing, not Formula One.

The cars helped – classic racing cars such as the cool and curvy C-Type Jag, the aeronautically streamlined Mercedes W196 “Silver Arrow”, and Ferrari’s shark-like 246 Dino – as did the drama of such epic races as the Indianapolis 500, Mille Miglia, Carrera Pan-America, Monte Carlo Rally and the great Le Mans 24 Heures.

It was a period of indomitable maestros who had fought in the war, flown Spitfires and Hurricanes even, and survived. For them, racing was about the parties and the girls, but also about the risks, the danger, about winning at all costs. There were no reinforced cockpits, fireproof racing suits or banks of tyre walls, and

certainly no computer-controlled gearboxes or carbon-fibre brakes. Cars were fragile, flammable and front-engined; roll bars were what you placed your Martini on. Tracks were narrow and bumpy, and drivers raced in all weathers. Courses were marked out by hay bales, sandbanks, columns of trees and concrete walls, and three or four drivers were killed every year; at Le Mans in 1955, a Mercedes collided with an Austin-Healey opposite the pits and crashed into the grandstand, killing more than 80 spectators.

It was an age of the driver as sporting hero, of fearless five-time world champion Juan Manuel Fangio, of “Hamlet in a helmet” Phil Hill, of such triumphant great British battlers as Stirling Moss, Mike Hawthorn and Peter Collins. And it was the decade of a colourful and charismatic, bluff and brilliant, renegade Texan cowboy racer who, perhaps more than any of them, embodied the true spirit of the times.

This man’s name was – and, I’m pleased to report, at the age of 79, still is – Carroll Shelby.



Driving force Top, Carroll Shelby, chicken farmer, big-game hunter, horse-breeder, deodorant-inventor, champion racing driver and

creator of the Cobra. Above, accepting the trophy for the Riverside Grand Prix in California in 1960, wearing his trademark work overalls

His right elbow in a cast, Shelby competed in a 12-hour race with his hand taped to the wheel. He finished second

Opposite, a new Cobra 289. Each is hand-built to individual specifications: this polished-aluminium finish costs \$15,000 extra

Once described as “living his life as if he had two laps to go and four cars to pass”, Shelby was one of the fastest, most swashbuckling and successful drivers of the Fifties. In 1954 he broke the land speed record at the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah in a British Austin-Healey. He drove the best sports cars in the toughest races all over the world, setting course records and at one time winning a peerless 19 races in a row. He raced in Formula One for Maserati and Aston Martin. In 1957 he won *Sports Illustrated’s* coveted Driver of the Year award and in 1959 he beat the all-conquering Ferraris to win, with British co-driver Roy Salvadori and the fledgling Aston Martin team, the most prestigious race of all: the Le Mans Grand Prix d’Endurance.

“I can’t describe the feeling of winning at Le Mans because, together with Indianapolis, it was the biggest motor race in the world,” says Shelby. “We knew we were behind the eight-ball because the Ferraris could out-horsepower us – they blew us off by 10-15 mph on the straights – and our gearbox wasn’t worth a shit, but the Aston handled better and our preparation and strategy were superior.”

It was the manner in which Shelby won, however, that has always captured the imagination of his fans. This former chicken farmer from Dallas, the son of a poor rural postman, eschewed traditional wool shirts and race suits in favour of driving in striped work overalls. A rush to the racetrack in 1953, direct from his farm, had left him no time to change and Shelby’s rough and ready race-wear rapidly became his trademark. In some circles it was known as the “Texas tuxedo”. At other times he would stroll around tracks in stetson, bootlace tie and cowboy boots.

Rugged, reed-tall, larger-than-life Shelby was something of a Lothario. Married six times – “four legit; twice to get women into the USA” – he charmed actresses, models and a former Miss Universe from Japan, several of whom were a decade or more younger than him. “All the drivers [of that era] were characters, but Shelby was a character in his own right”, remembered Ford boss Lee Iacocca a few years ago. “He always had a great-looking girl on his arm.”

“Yeah, I can’t deny that,” says Shelby. “I like women, I’ve had the pleasure of knowing a lot of wonderful women, and I’ve got a lot of wonderful memories. You have to understand that one of the great things about being a race

driver was that they always had the couthie shows around the time of the Grand Prix. All the top models used to hang out at the race track and yep, those girls liked to meet drivers.”

There were also Shelby’s celebrated on-track exploits. A bad accident during the 1954 Carrera Pan-America, in which he struck a roadside boulder, flipped his car four times and was found by a tribe of Mexican Indians, left Shelby’s right elbow in a cast for nine months. Yet it did not stop him competing in the gruelling 12-hour race at Sebring, America’s version of Le Mans. Contracted to drive a three-litre Monza Ferrari with Phil Hill, Shelby struck upon the idea of replacing his plaster cast with a lighter, more race-efficient fibreglass one and had his hand taped to the steering wheel. He finished second. “Those things never slowed me up much back then,” he says.

In a Governor’s Cup race in the Bahamas, Shelby lost his headlights so, at 100 mph in the inky blackness, he tailgated the Marquis Alfonso de Portago’s Ferrari, swooping around him on the final lap to win. When the wiring of a car he was driving in Argentina caught fire in the pits and no extinguisher could be found, Shelby shouted to co-driver Dale Duncan to jump out and urinate on it. Shelby and Duncan went on to finish tenth, and first in their class.

Most remarkable of all was his victory at Le Mans. Suffering from acute chest pains, Shelby slipped nitroglycerine pills under his tongue throughout the race for relief. It slowed him down temporarily, but also allowed him to drive through the hurt. A year later, however, at the height of his career, his doctor diagnosed his condition as angina, and aged 37 he would be forced to retire from driving forever.

“Today there are fewer and fewer activities where you can measure someone’s heroism by what they do,” says Richard Symons, a filmmaker who has made a documentary on Shelby to be broadcast on the BBC in mid-June.

“Shelby not only put his life on the line for his passion, but he mastered it – at Le Mans in 1959 he was the best in the world.”

F SCOTT FITZGERALD’S hokey observation that “there are no second acts in American lives” has been disproved many times and Carroll Shelby is one in a long line of tenacious Americans who have lived to triumph again. In fact, Shelby would go on to even greater

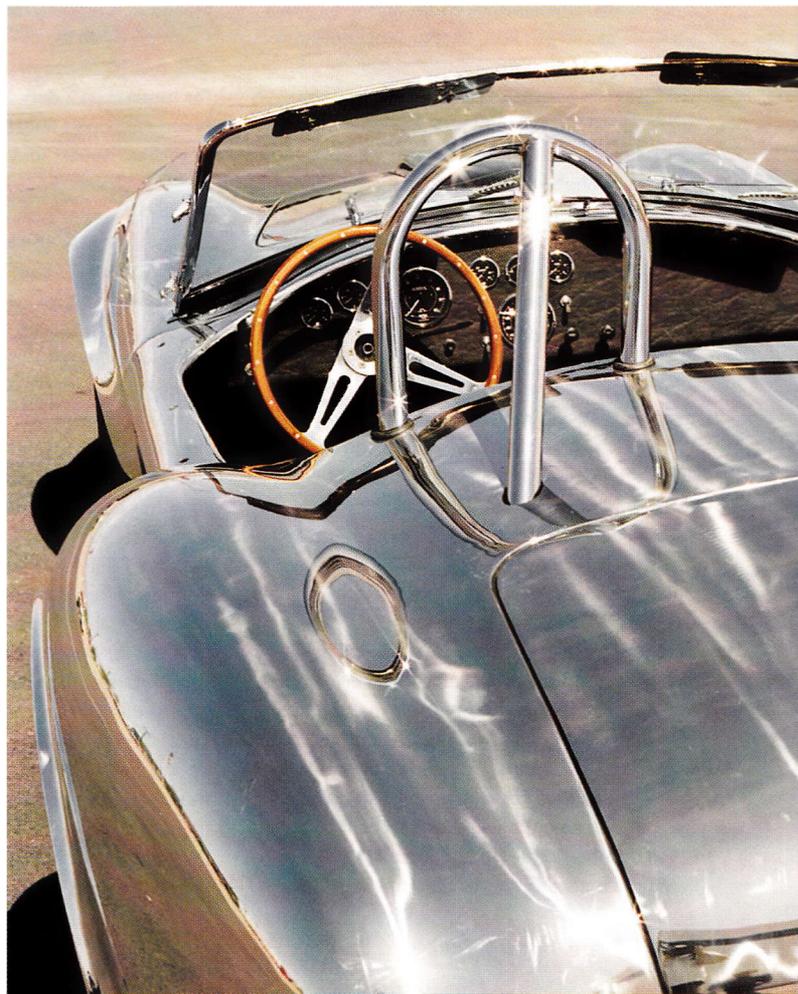
heights, developing three of the most powerful and desirable sports cars ever to hit the road or racetrack – the Cobra, Mustang and Ford GT-40 – and, almost unimaginably, to build an American racing car that would beat the seemingly invincible Ferraris.

After his last race in 1960, a season in which, despite his ailments, he was crowned USA driving champion, Shelby decided to divert his energies into building “race cars” (as he calls them) rather than winning in them. It was the natural evolution of both a long-held desire to design cars and of a sharp entrepreneurial spirit.

Having served in the US Army Air Corps during the Second World War, becoming an expert test pilot and bomber instructor, Shelby had started a string of businesses before giving them up to pursue his passion for racing. He had run a small fleet of dump trucks, bought and sold government surplus, worked in the oil fields and had a go at chicken farming. Over the years, Shelby has also owned racing schools, car dealerships, tyre distributors, cattle ranches, real estate, restaurants, big-game operations in East Africa and sport-fishing charters in Mexico. He has traded airplanes, bred horses, managed motels and created his own best-selling brand of chilli. He even developed a deodorant called “Carroll Shelby’s Pit Stop” (it bombed). One of his best friends, former Dallas advertising executive Bill Neale, once said, “Shelby could sell white blackbirds.”

Firing his motivation was an animus with the most ruthless and brilliant grandee motorsport has ever seen: Enzo Ferrari. Of course, the two had known each other in the Fifties. Shelby had bought cars from Ferrari for wealthy US aficionados and spent the summer of 1955 hanging out with Enzo’s son Dino, who would die of muscular dystrophy a year later at 24. Enzo had even offered “Shel” three jobs, but the Texan turned them all down. This was not something Enzo was used to, especially in an era when his cars were winning world championships and Ferrari was the team to beat. Then, as now, driving for Ferrari was seen as a privilege, a mission of some responsibility rather than an offer of work.

“Enzo’s approach to his drivers was a little different than what I wanted to live with,” says Shelby, referring to Commendatore Ferrari’s reputation as the “Machiavelli of Maranello” and infamous “agitator of men”. “He played them against each other. I don’t blame him for that but it created an emotional atmosphere that would get you in a state that’d get you killed. I saw Luigi Musso get killed driving for Ferrari, and he was a damn good friend of mine. I saw



“Cobra drivers were so far ahead at times that they would come into the pits for a glass of water or a Coke”

Opposite, clockwise from top right: Shelby overturns his Austin-Healey on the Carrera Pan-America road race in 1954; disaster strikes for the Cobra Daytona Coupé on its 1964 debut; and again the same year, inside the Shelby factory; memorabilia in the factory; a Daytona Coupé faces two Ferrari GTOs on the starting line of the 1964 Tour de France; Shelby makes a delivery

[Eugenio] Castellotti get killed, and I saw Fangio leave the team for the same reason.”

What about Enzo's legendary imperious manner? “Oh, I could deal with him personally. I realised what he was: he was domineering, I'd call it kinda hard-headed, and that was the reason that he accomplished what he did. I saw what he was doing, I understood what he was doing, and I just didn't want to be a part of it. Besides, I had a wife and three kids in the States to support and the money wasn't good enough.”

The way he developed a car that would beat Ferrari is a story as much about luck as it is about guile and determination. Noticing that England's AC Cars, which had started producing roadsters way back in 1903, had lost their engine supplier and fallen on hard times (the company was reduced to making motorised invalid carriages), and that the giant Ford Motor Company had developed a new lightweight, small-block, super-powered V8 engine without a sports car to put it in, Shelby concocted the most unlikely of motoring marriages.

Moving to Southern California, where he surrounded himself with a ragbag of hell-raisin' hot-rodders and former aerospace industry odd-bods, Shelby began to put together his car. The team refashioned the chassis of the AC Ace and adapted the engine of the Ford V8 and the Cobra was born. “The name came to me in a dream,” says Shelby. Initially, just three cars were built, although the first was painted a different colour each time motoring journalists took it for a test drive, giving the appearance that dozens were in production.

The impact was instant and enormous. The fastest production car ever made at that time, the Cobra could do 0-60 in little more than the time it took you to say it: 3.9 seconds. It was a raucous, handsome, muscular dream of a car, at once agile and aggressive, a “real race car for the street” – a Cobra driver was once caught speeding on the M1 at 183mph.

During 1963, having hired top US drivers Phil Hill, Dan Gurney and Ken Miles, Shelby and his cars won the US Road Racing Championship with ease. “Cobra drivers used to flip coins to see who was going to win,” says Miles in Richard Symons' documentary. British mechanic Charlie “Mad Bomber” Agapiou concurs: “Our drivers were so far ahead at times that they would come

into the pits for a glass of water or a Coke, so that when they went out again they would have a little competition and could race a bit.”

Further refinements produced the near-200mph Cobra Daytona Coupé and in 1964 Shelby started to beat Ferrari GTOs in races. At Le Mans that year, the Cobra defeated Ferrari to finish first in its GT class and fourth overall. (At that time there were two classes at Le Mans: prototype racers and Grand Touring production cars.) Enzo Ferrari was so rattled that, with the Shelby team just one-and-a-half points behind in the GT championship, he managed to get the last race of the season at Monza cancelled. Shelby says the Automobile Club of Italy claimed it couldn't raise enough money for the purse. Enzo Ferrari also announced that he would not enter any works Ferraris for the 1965 season.

Shelby, however, was unstoppable. In July 1965, with five months of the season to go, Shelby's Cobra Daytonas won the FIA World Championship for GT cars, wresting away a title that had been practically owned by Ferrari for more than a decade. Shelby had not only beaten Europe's finest, trouncing Ferraris, Porsches, Jaguars and Aston Martins, but was the first to win the GT crown in a US-built car. It put the country on the motorsport map.

“It's hard now to appreciate the magnitude of Shelby's achievement, but it certainly captures the American spirit of winning against the odds,” says Richard Symons. “It was about America v Europe, new money versus old money, meritocracy versus aristocracy. This guy takes a collection of parts, some mass-produced, soups them up and goes on to beat the best in the world. It's like a man who puts together an outfit from Top Shop, M&S and Bhs that actually ends up looking better than the fella in a Savile Row suit.”

More victories were to come. Having already transformed Ford's Mustang into a full-thrust fastback for both street and track, he was asked to take over the company's GT-40 programme. Infuriated by Enzo's rejection of an offer to buy Ferrari, Henry Ford II vowed to destroy him on the track. Winning Le Mans was the target; money was no object. “We probably spent more developing cars for Le Mans in '66 than the equivalent of what the top three Formula One teams will spend this year,” says Shelby.

When GT-40s crossed the finish line in first, second and third, after a race that passed the 3,000-mile mark, Ford was there in person to witness the realisation of his dream. On the podium he sprayed the race winners, Chris Amon and Bruce McLaren, with Champagne, starting a trend that continues to this day. Shelby and Ford went on to win the next three Le Mans in a row.

CARROLL SHELBY SHOULD not really have been available to star in his second act. Diagnosed with a heart murmur at the age of seven, and with a family history of hereditary heart conditions – his father died at 43 – he was told in 1960 that he had five years to live.

Shelby calculates that he has had 40 major operations in the past 40 years, including three heart by-passes and two transplants, the last, in 1990, being donated by a 38-year-old guy who keeled over at a craps table in Vegas. “Yeah, I know,” he laughs, “I have the heart of a gambler ticking inside me.” He also has the kidney of his son, Michael.

None of it seems to slow him down. In the late Eighties he was contracted by Chrysler to develop the sports car that became the Dodge Viper. In 1997 he premiered the awesome 170mph Shelby Series 1, a development of the original Cobra, the earliest models of which are among the most sought-after cars in the world. Last year he took a cameo role in John McTiernan's remake of *Rollerball*, which also features Shelby cars. He also regularly takes out lawsuits against the estimated 200 kit-car manufacturers that have made Cobra replicas.

For fun, he restores classic race planes from the Thirties. He loves to drive his supercharged, Viper-engined pick-up truck from his home in Bel Air to his factory at the Las Vegas Speedway, scaring far younger drivers along the way. He has money but is not motivated by it – those who are he calls “people with the greeds”.

In 1991 he launched a foundation that funds heart transplants for disadvantaged children. In 1997 he married Cleo, an English-born woman almost 25 years his junior. “There is something life-affirming about Shelby,” says Richard Symons. “He is a man who never gives up – he's like a force of nature.”

“I'm still making plans for the next 20 years and I'm still enthusiastic about the things I want to accomplish,” says Shelby, when asked what's left for him to do. “My greatest achievement is whatever I'm going to do next.”

Richard Symons' documentary, *The Cobra-Ferrari Wars*, will be screened on BBC4 around the Le Mans weekend (15-16 June 2002)

