

COLLECTING

Revenge of the Econobox: Early Japanese Imports Find Admirers



ALL IN THE FAMILY: The Yamaguchis, from left, Taiki, Koji and Terry, with their Toyota Celicas from the 1970s. Axel Koester for The New York Times

By **Richard S. Chang**

Feb. 3, 2012

WHEN Japanese cars and trucks began arriving in the United States in earnest during the 1970s, they were widely seen as disposable.

Reliable, maybe. Future classics? Not likely.

But in the past decade, those bargain-price models from the '70s and '80s have been revisited by a generation of enthusiasts who grew up riding in the back seats.

“For many like myself, it’s nostalgic,” said Jun Imai, a 36-year-old designer at the Hot Wheels division of Mattel, where he directed the styling for die-

cast models of two 1970s-vintage Nissans released last year.

“It’s a very special feeling I have for cars like these — the designs, the sound of the engines, the way they drive,” Mr. Imai said. “They are so distinctive, yet most are approachable in terms of costs and availability.”

Mr. Imai, who lives in Southern California, owns a 1971 Datsun 510 wagon and a 1972 Datsun pickup. The vehicles’ peculiar silhouettes, diminutive scale and heavy use of chrome trim are typical of Japanese styling of the period.

Yorgo Tloupas, a co-founder and creative director of Intersection magazine, which is based in Paris, is the owner of a 1981 Honda Prelude. “I love that they don’t look like anything else,” Mr. Tloupas said.

“The first time I saw the Honda 600, I had to have the car,” he said, referring to the tiny 2-cylinder sedan that was among the company’s first models shipped to the United States.

The trend has grown rapidly. In 2005, Terry Yamaguchi, 39, and her husband, Koji, 41, who own a 1972 Toyota Celica coupe and a 1977 Celica liftback, started a casual meet-up in Long Beach, Calif., for like-minded enthusiasts. More than 200 cars showed up; the next year they created an official event, the Japanese Classic Car Show, now in its seventh year and attracting some 350 entries.

“We were not going to continue,” Ms. Yamaguchi said. “It cost a lot and we didn’t have any sponsors. We only did it for ourselves. But people were excited.”

The Japanese have a term for their suddenly trendy vintage cars. They are called nostalgic cars, said Benjamin Hsu, a co-founder of Japanese Nostalgic Car, a Web site and magazine based in Diamond Bar, Calif. “You know how the Japanese like to appropriate English terms but use them in a slightly different way,” Mr. Hsu said.

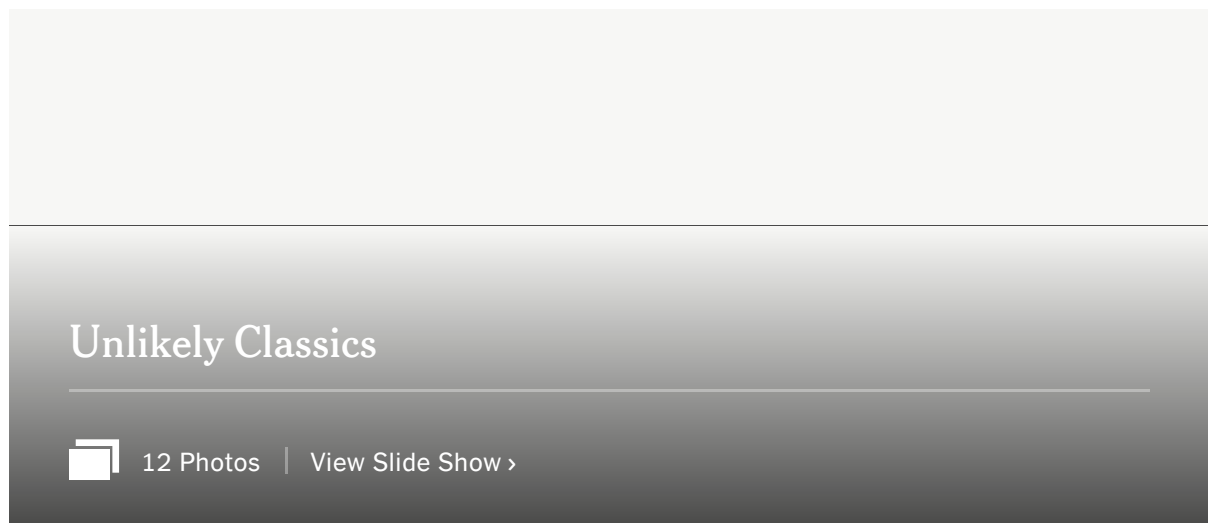
Yet the name is fitting. The demographic that’s seemingly responsible for the popularity of Japanese nostalgic cars is 30-something men who grew up with the cars. Mr. Imai remembers his uncles working on and racing Datsun 510s and 240Zs when he was a boy.

“When you have cars that were everyday cars, there’s an emotional connection,” said Bryan Thompson, a designer for Nissan, both in the Japan and the United States, from 2001 to 2009. “They’re a part of your life in the way a pet is a part of your life, or a family member.”

Mr. Thompson, who is now a contract designer for Volvo, cited his parents' 1983 Toyota Tercel wagon as the inspiration behind his career choice.

For Mr. Hsu, interest in the era's cars was stimulated during a layover at the Narita airport near Tokyo on a trip to Taiwan. "I stepped out for one second and saw the coolest cars I had ever seen," he said. "They were cars that I never knew existed. That kind of blew my mind."

Mr. Hsu founded the Japanese Nostalgic Car Web site with his brother, Dan, in 2006. They began publishing the magazine, a quarterly, two years later.



Dan Hsu

Mr. Hsu said that the nostalgic car trend in the United States was partly an evolution of the Japanese import-tuning craze of the 1990s that spawned the "Fast and the Furious" film franchise. A further push came around 2000, as interest rose in performance cars made for Japan's home market (a movement in its own right, known as Japanese Domestic Market, or J.D.M.).

"People really wanted to find out what Japanese people were doing," Mr. Hsu said. "And what Japanese people were doing was drifting."

Drifting, a professional motor sport in Japan since 2000, came from the same hooligan spirit as drag racing. But instead of speeding in a straight line, drivers slide their cars around curves, smoke pouring off the tires. It required a specific kind of car — lightweight, and more important, rear-drive.

“Japanese companies weren’t building rear-wheel-drive cars, unless you get to high-end luxury,” Mr. Hsu said, which meant using models like the Toyota Corolla GT-S and the Nissan 240SX from the 1980s.

Mr. Hsu owns a 1986 Toyota Corolla GT-S. “It had all the performance goodies — twin-cam, 16 valves, rear-wheel drive with an optional limited-slip differential,” he said. “To me that is the ideal performance package. The car is lightweight. It handles brilliantly. The motor revs to 7,500 r.p.m.”

The Corolla GT-S “was the gateway drug” to other nostalgic cars, Mr. Hsu said. He also cited other popular examples: the first-generation Toyota Celica; the Honda N600 and Civic CVCC; and several Mazdas — RX-2, RX-3 and the first-generation RX-7.

Many nostalgia-car enthusiasts modify the engines and suspensions, and install parts made for Japan-market models. But the appeal of vintage Japanese cars isn’t based solely on performance.

Mr. Tloupas, whose magazine collaborated with Honda last year in customizing a CR-Z, said he had always been captivated by Japanese design. “They were kind of quirky, he said.

Mr. Thompson explained that Japanese designers were still trying to find their aesthetic and, much as Chinese automakers are doing today, they imitated existing forms.

“Look at a lot of the early to mid-1970s Japanese economy cars,” he said. “They were oftentimes reinterpretations of American cars from the 1960s. Because they didn’t have the same proportions, they were very strange.”

Of course, Japanese automakers didn’t always get designs wrong. The Datsun 240Z was popular from its release as a 1970 model. The Datsun 510 has served as a platform for road racers for decades. And Japanese pickups are noted for their durability; it’s not unusual to find one with 300,000 miles on the odometer.

This year, Hot Wheels released two 1:43 scale diecast models of vintage Japanese cars, the 1971 Nissan Skyline 2000GT-X and 1973 Nissan Skyline 2000GT-R. In Japan, they are equivalent to the 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air or Corvette, but neither car was sold new in the United States.

The Skylines are very rare, even in Japan, and very expensive. Of the 1971 Skyline, Mr. Imai, said, “From a cultural standpoint, you’ll notice more recently this car appearing in movies and video games.”

Another model, the Toyota 2000GT, is widely regarded as the original Japanese supercar. It was sold only in limited numbers in the United States and is valued at more than \$400,000 in collector-car guides; a 2000GT racecar is currently being offered for \$1.7 million.

But most vintage Japanese cars remain very affordable. On eBay, a 1976 Honda Civic CVCC 5-speed with 59,000 miles recently sold for \$3,550. A 1977 Corolla SR5 with 55,000 miles sold for \$4,000.

Those prices may sound high for 35-year-old Japanese compacts — the prices are roughly what the cars sold for when new — but they are low compared with, say, a vintage Alfa Romeo or Chevrolet Camaro. And now owners, aware of the rising interest, are increasingly choosing to hold onto their cars.

“There are people out there,” Mr. Hsu said. “They’ve got extremely low-mileage cars, completely original, stowed in their garages all over the place.”

ADVERTISEMENT

© 2021 The New York Times Company

[NYTCo](#) [Contact Us](#) [Accessibility](#) [Work with us](#) [Advertise](#) [T Brand Studio](#) [Your Ad Choices](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Terms of Service](#)
[Terms of Sale](#) [Site Map](#) [Canada](#) [International](#) [Help](#) [Subscriptions](#)