

Low and Slow: Gypsy Rose

Not many individual cars can claim credit for giving rise to an entire automotive subculture. And yet Gypsy Rose, rolling out of the barrios of East L.A., down Whittier Boulevard and into world-wide recognition, has managed to do just that. Read on to learn more about the car that helped shape modern lowrider culture.

Jesse Valadez was 18 in 1964. A Mexican-American, he immigrated with his family from Nueva Rosita, Mexico to Texas and then to Los Angeles in the late 1950s. Valadez and his brothers, led by Armando, formed the Imperials car club in their parents' house in East Los Angeles amidst a newly emerging southern California automotive trend and lifestyle: lowriding. Combining the custom car styles of the period with years of automotive culture within the Mexican-American Barrios of East Los Angeles, "lowriders" were ornately painted full-size American sedans with modified suspension to sit as close to the ground as possible. The cars became an artistic expression, modified for capturing the attention of bystanders as they cruised along the boulevard. When the Valadez brothers launched the club they helped kick off what was to be an explosive and distinct movement in automotive history.



Jesse Valadez's impact on history was not confined to the creation of one of the most influential clubs or even helping to kick off the movement, however. Valadez had lowriders throughout the '60s and, like many of his contemporaries, they resembled the traditional custom cars of the era. Metalflake, candys, pearls, fades, scallops, lace paintjobs and anything else that could draw attention under the street lights as the cars cruised by was applied. The visual similarities with custom cars all but ended by the 1970s as the lowrider community developed a truly distinct style evidenced and established by what would become its most famous creation – Gypsy Rose.

By the 1970s, Valadez had built a total of three cars bearing the name Gypsy Rose. The first, possibly a 1963 Impala had Gypsy Rose painted on the back window but was otherwise relatively mundane by comparison and is largely unknown today. In the late 1960s, Valadez purchased another 1963 Impala and set out to take the rose theme to the next level. It was this car that first garnered national attention. Valadez commissioned young artist and painter Walt Prey at Carter Pro Paint on Burbank Boulevard to work his magic on the car. The result: a vibrant red, pink and pearl white paint job featuring an inset of roses under the car's beltline. The car was a masterpiece and immediately stood apart from the rest. It debuted at the Winternationals Rod and Custom Show in 1968. This was solidified when it graced the pages of the March 1972 *Car Craft*, making it among the first lowriders featured in a mainstream automotive publication.

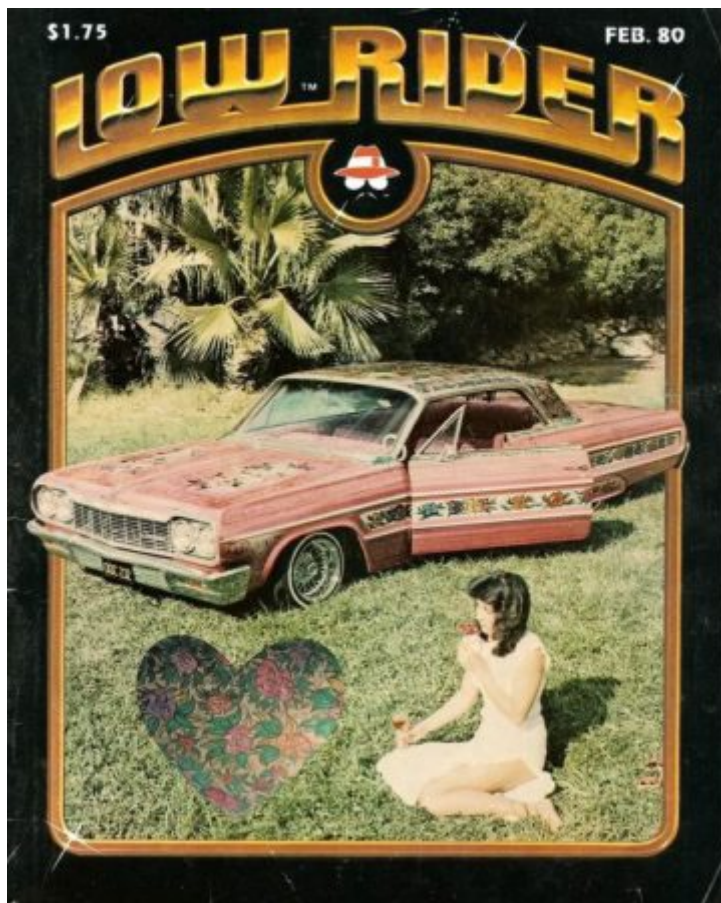


But then tragedy struck, in 1972, the car was destroyed by a group of gang members. This unfortunate act gave Valadez and Prey the opportunity to refine their vision, however, and what came next would change everything. By this time, Prey had opened his own shop, Walt's Custom Studio in Van Nuys, CA. Working with painter Don Heckman, Prey, inspired by the décor of a local Mexican restaurant and the theme of the car, laid out hundreds of roses, leaves, veiling and ornate pin striping. On a base of murando gold Pearl white with candy red and pink panels, the artwork is layered with endless coats of lacquer clear, believed to be over 20 gallons worth. The interior was done at Jesse's older brother's shop, Gil's Auto in Huntington Park, CA, with a crushed velvet upholstery in biscuit tuck. The back seat was modified for lounging, a cocktail bar was installed, and chandeliers found at a garage sale were fitted as interior lights.

The car was an instant hit on Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles where it could often be found leading the pack of award winning cars from the Imperials on Friday and Saturday nights as they cruised up and down the drag. It wasn't long before Gypsy Rose garnered attention far beyond East Los Angeles, becoming an icon for the culture and the area. When NBC began production on its primetime sitcom *Chico and the Man*, Gypsy Rose was selected to appear in the opening credits as it cruised the

barrios of East Los Angeles. *Chico and the Man* was the first primetime national U.S. TV show to be set in a Mexican-American neighborhood and, with Gypsy Rose's opening appearance every night, solidified the car's importance for the Hispanic community while also drawing national recognition to lowriders.

As lowriders grew more popular and the community expanded throughout the 1970s and 1980s, so too did the popularity of Gypsy Rose. It went on to be featured in practically every periodical published on lowriders in the U.S. and abroad. As early as 1980, *Lowrider Magazine* declared the car the "World's Most Popular Lowrider." Gypsy Rose, along with the Imperials, were featured in movies, TV shows, *Hot Rod Magazine* and *Life* magazine, among many others.



Lowriders began to move from the boulevards to the exhibition halls much like had occurred with their custom car predecessors. The builders and owners grew older and

the cars more expensive and over the top. Shows dominated and brought many of the top cars from the cruising scene in to the show circuit. Gypsy Rose and members of the Imperials no doubt, spurred this on. Cars that succeeded Gypsy Rose were increasingly more ornate and paint schemes based on themes became the norm.

The car continued to cruise the boulevard until Valadez, recognizing the increasing significance, pulled the car from the road. It sat untouched in his garage and didn't reappear until the 1990s when it once again hit the show circuit after some minor repairs and touch ups and returned the car to its former glory. Gypsy Rose was thankfully never entirely repainted or restored and wears its original artwork by Walt Pray and Don Heckman. It has since been exhibited at car shows around the world and in museums across the country.

Sadly, Jesse Valadez passed away in 2011. At his service were hundreds of lowriders and members of clubs from around the country, all of whom came out to pay their respects to a legend within the lowrider community. Valadez and Gypsy Rose took one last cruise down Whittier Boulevard, accompanied by some 500 lowriders.

Before his passing, Valadez placed Gypsy Rose in the care of his son, Jesse Valadez II. The younger Valadez has done his part to ensure the legacy of this famous rolling canvas lives on.



Gypsy Rose became the gold standard for what a lowrider could and should be and represents the history of an entire movement. A cultural icon and a benchmark of lowriding style, Gypsy Rose is well deserving of its place in history.

Come see this rolling work of art for yourself at this year's Cars at the Capital in Washington, D.C. Gypsy Rose will be on display for the first of the event's three weeks, running April 12-19.