

Award-Winning Custom: The Hirohata Merc

It started out as a standard 1951 Mercury Coupe. And then Sam and George Barris got their hands on it. Here's a look at the "the most famous custom," a one-of-a-kind original that set a new standard for style and attitude in the custom car building scene.

In 1952, fresh out of the Navy and eager to cruise Los Angeles in a full-blown custom, Masato (Bob) Hirohata located a 1951 Mercury Coupe to become the basis for his radically modified ride. Hirohata took the car to the leading shop at the time, Barris Kustoms, who had already produced many notable customs and had previously chopped Hirohata's 1949 Chevy. As far as customs go, there are few names more inseparable from the form than Barris. Hirohata had only one request for the final result, a pillarless "hardtop" look similar to what the shop had done to Nick Matranga's then famous 1940 Mercury Coupe. Beyond that Hirohata allowed the shop to flex their creative muscle.



Having little to no restrictions placed on what they could do to the car, the Barris brothers, Sam and George, assisted by Frank Sonzogni, let their imagination run wild, modifying and customizing nearly every square inch of the car. Taking ideals and styling cues from a number of different sources, their radical chop and customization of the car lent it a wholly unique look. From its “Frenched” headlamps, custom grille built from three 1951 Ford grilles, to its 1952 Buick side trim, nothing was left unaltered. The body-line was even modified, the corners of the doors and trunk were rounded and the car was treated to an entirely custom rolled and pleated upholstery job by Carson Top Shop. Complementing the interior details was a glovebox with pins striped by the renowned Von Dutch. Most striking was the bright green hue to the paint known as “Ice Green.” The many customs that came before from either Barris or competitors tended to feature dark, mundane colors.

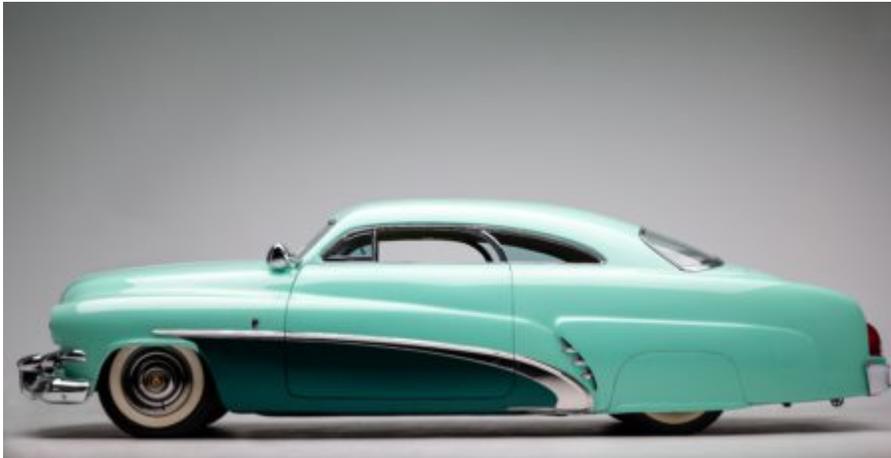
With an appearance utterly unlike anything before it, the Hirohata Merc began making appearances within the pages of popular magazines such as *Motor Trend* and *Hot Rod*, while also winning an unprecedented number of awards on the show circuit. Hirohata went so far as to drive the car from Southern California to Indianapolis after having a brand new 1953 Cadillac overhead valve V-8 engine installed. The impetus for the trip? A custom car show and the Indianapolis 500. He penned an account of his road trip in 1953 called “Kross Kountry in a Kustom – Mile After Mile in My Modified Mercillac” that was published in *Rod & Custom*. The Merc proved quite a sight to behold as it rolled through towns across the country that had yet to be exposed to radical custom cars. The Mercury, at that time known as the Mercillac, went on to take home top honors at the Indianapolis show.



After racking up a treasure trove of awards, Bob used the Merc on and off as his daily driver. By 1954, George Barris repainted the car a lime green metallic, keeping a dark green below the Buick trim. It was in this finish that the car made its Hollywood debut in the movie *Running Wild* (1955). Not long after, Hirohata sold the car. Robert Waldsmith purchased the car and was using it as his daily transportation when he was hit by a car. Although he wanted Barris to fix the damage, he couldn't afford it and eventually commissioned Sam Gates of Sam's Auto Body Works in Pasadena to complete the repairs and repaint. The car was treated to a two-tone gold paint job, again divided by the Buick trim. The car was eventually sold to Doug Kinney, an employee of Ed "Big Daddy" Roth who painted the car lime green when the gold laquer paint began to crack.

The Merc ended up on a used car lot in 1959 after Kinney traded it in. It was here 16-year-old high schooler named Jim McNeil spotted the Merc while driving to work with his brother. McNeil had known the car and its history as a Barris Kustom having grown up mere blocks from the Barris shop in Lynwood, CA. But customs had been fading from popularity and the Merc wasn't perfect, so it was his older brother who was even more familiar with the history that told him he had to have it. After

negotiations and a loan from his girlfriend's dad, McNeil purchased the Merc for \$500. It was his first car, daily driver and as a teenager used it to capture the eye of his eventual wife. Some five years later, McNeil placed the car in storage to focus on his family. Thankfully, from day one, McNeil realized the significance of the car and ensured that it was never redone or restored in a manner that might compromise the originality or disrupt the history in any way.



Busy with work, family, life, and other cars, the famed Merc sat waiting for Jim's attentive care until the late 1980s. By this time, most considered the Merc lost to history. The admiration and longing for the return of this historic artifact led to the creation of a highly detailed clone. A mutual acquaintance brought McNeil in contact with *Rod and Custom* magazine editor, Pat Ganahl, who brought the car back into the purview of the classic car world. Ganahl arranged a deal in which the magazine would fund the restoration and allow McNeil to do all of the work himself provided they could cover it in *Rod and Custom*.

After nearly seven years, the car was completed and revealed at the Oakland Museum of California for an exhibit titled, *Hot Rods and Customs: The Men and Machines of California's Car Culture*. McNeil completed nearly all of the work himself with the exception of the color-matched nitrocellulose lacquer. As the exhibition drew near, McNeil began to run out of time, requiring Junior (Hershel) Conway of Junior's House of Color to lay down the final layer of paint. Conway had learned to paint

while working at Barris Kustoms in the 1950s and although he never worked on the Merc in period, he was good friends with Hirohata throughout his life.



More than half a century later, the Hirohata Merc still turns heads and has been displayed across the country and abroad at museums and car shows. In 2015, it took home “Best in Class” at the Pebble Beach Concours d’Elegance in their first ever custom postwar Mercury class. And while George Barris went on to create a number of iconic customs for film and television, few matched the eye-catching contours of the Hirohata Merc.

Come see this radically customized icon at this year’s Cars at the Capital in Washington, D.C. The Hirohata Merc will be on display for the third and final week of the event, running April 27-May 4.