

King of Cabs

THE CHECKER CAB—AN EXEMPLAR of four-wheeled Americana—owes its existence to Russian emigrant Morris Markin. Born in Smolensk in 1893, Markin immigrated to the United States in his late teens. He settled in Chicago and amassed a small fortune, first as a tailor and then as owner of a clothing company. After acquiring the financially troubled Commonwealth Motors as repayment of a debt in 1921, Markin soon bought several other automobile-related companies. By 1922, with the Hadley-Knight chassis plant and the Dort bodyworks in hand, Checker Cab Manufacturing Co. was formed and began production in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

The name Checker arose from a consortium of Chicago cab drivers who, in the early 1920s, were using a variety of car models as taxis. Markin applied the name to his new company and began both building cabs and operating taxi fleets, which guaranteed him a steady market for his own product.

By the mid-1950s the tank-like profile of the Checker A8 taxicab—forerunner to the Marathon—was a common sight on the streets of American cities. It became particularly synonymous with New York, the largest taxi market in the country and vitally important to Checker's success. However, legal troubles, contract disputes and fierce competition in the taxicab market from the Big Three began to put the pinch on Checker in the 1960s. After

Markin's death in 1970 the company spiraled downward, with dwindling sales, lack of development dollars, and a reputation for poor quality.

One of the last Checkers to roll out of Kalamazoo was this 1982 Marathon. The car initially did duty in the Windy City, and still bears its Chicago cab green and cream colors. It has a Chevrolet 350-cid V8 of unknown vintage underhood—originally it ran on propane. For many



NICK KURCZEWSKI

Checker owners now, originality takes a back seat to keeping the cars on the road.

"When I bought it, it was a hunk of crap," says owner Bobby Lowich.

Raised in Brooklyn, Lowich began driving cabs in 1962, working the night shift for 20-some years. Lowich has owned this Marathon for seven years, but he laughs when asked for a guesstimate as to how many miles are on the car.

"Miles? Oh god... it's been around the world!" he says. "I don't really know."

What is clear is that the interior is a tribute to black vinyl, with anything not vinyl slathered in thick black rubber matting. We slot the column-mounted Turbo Hyrda-Matic into Drive, and the car creeps away. With Lowich's reassurance, we readily learn we can trust the front-disc/rear-drum brakes, and in fact, they are surprisingly effective.

The total lack of steering feel, on the other hand, is a bit unnerving—it is hard to imagine wielding this beast through Manhattan traffic. The car's federally mandated bumpers are exceedingly ugly, but they do have a way of ensuring pedestrians and other drivers steer clear of your path. The independent front coil suspension and solid rear axle are crude—potholes cause the car to crash and bang like a toolbox clattering down a fire escape. Yet for the most part, bumps are heard more than actually felt; it's a solid ride. Even the mystery small-block under the hood gives the car acceptable grunt.

It surely won't win the pole at Monaco, but it gives the driver a fighting chance against buses and dump trucks.

Checker closed its doors in June 1982, but strong club support confirms the car's status as an American icon is intact. Plenty of thumbs-up and waves from passersby in Brooklyn's Prospect Park prove that the mighty Checker's popularity is as strong now as it was during its long reign as king of cabs.

—NICK KURCZEWSKI

MARKET

Silver Auction

Oct. 23

Portland, Ore.

1972 Datsun 240Z

Four-speed. A little grimy, but very original underhood. Claimed second owner, no accidents. Rock chips in paint, most not touched up. Pits in hood all the way to bare metal. Rust bubbles in front fenders behind wheel well, some rust underneath as well. Interior original and surprisingly nice. Small dent in rear driver's



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side. Overall, at one time a pretty decent survivor that's been allowed to deteriorate.

Sold at \$1,098

When the first Datsun 240Zs arrived in 1969, they were an up-to-date Samurai sword being driven right through the hearts of the archaic MGBs and Triumphs that BMC had been foisting on the American public. Thirty-five years later, perfect Zs are \$25,000 cars. But nasty pigs like this 1972 model, which has been allowed to rust out and that will cost far more than \$25,000 to make right, are really just a step away from that great parts yard in the sky.

—KEITH MARTIN