

An affordable, uncompromising sports car

THE LOTUS EUROPA MAY NOT HAVE been the first mid-engined road car to enter the sports car arena in 1967, but it was the one that would make the most waves. Produced until 1972, the Europa sold more than 9000 copies, a package that reflected Lotus founder Colin Chapman's philosophy of pure driving dynamics in an affordable sports car.

The Europa combined Grand Prix technology with Chapman's insistence that less weight, not brute force, was the best means of maximizing performance. Lotus took the steel backbone chassis of the front-engine Elan and, essentially, flipped it front-to-back for mid-engine use, infusing the Europa with Formula One flair, much in the way auto-makers use paddle shifters in today's road rockets. The resulting Y-shaped frame was light, strong and ready for a free-revving engine to propel the new mid-engined Lotus down the road or track. But which engine to use? The answer came from an unlikely source.

In 1965 Renault had introduced its revolutionary R16. This small, boxy hatchback employed a 1470-cc gem of an engine. The pushrod four had an aluminum block with wet liners, a cooling fan operated via a thermostatic switch, and an alternator—all fairly cutting edge for the time. Attached to the front of the engine was an all-synchromesh, aluminum-cased four-speed transmission. Luckily for Lotus, the unit was longitudinally mounted in the R16.

Once again, Lotus engineers took a good thing and flipped it around. With the transaxle/engine turned front-to-back, it became a perfect mate to Chapman's 1300-pound bantamweight.

The steel backbone chassis is bonded directly to a thin fiberglass body. There is even a tray that seals the underbody, and the resulting drag coefficient of 0.29 is hugely impressive, as is the chassis' stiffness. Lotus engineering director Ron Hickman inspired the Europa's exterior



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lines and the design was refined for production by John Fraylings. Whereas the front is lithe, low and lean, the rear half of the car is boxy, slab-sided and tall. The rear window is mailbox-slot small, and the car's side panels add to its tail-heavy appearance. These unconventional looks earned Europa the nickname of "the bread van" in England. However, it would be a rare bread van indeed that could match a Europa when the road starts to twist.

The earliest cars, the Series 1s, are

truest to Chapman's original vision and are also among the rarest, with around 300 made before being superseded by the Series 1A model. The example seen here belongs to Carmelo Crisafulli of Brooklyn, New York, who bought it new in 1968 for \$4,061. It is completely original, with just 33,000 miles on the odometer. Despite having only 87 horsepower to play with, Crisafulli says the Europa "feels like a go-kart... and is a blast to drive." Simply getting in might be the biggest challenge,

but once behind the wheel and the spartan, aluminum dash, the car fits like a glove—a tight glove.

The Europa offers a fairly compliant ride for a car of its size and weight; there is none of the crash-bang craziness one might expect. The biggest dangers are tollbooths and hot weather. In the manner of the Ford GT40, Chapman insisted the car's windows be fixed shut to save weight and cost. That's right: sealed windows and no a/c.

After meeting with the real world of warm sunny days and fender benders, both the sealed windows and the bonded body panels would be phased out with later models. By 1968 the Europa body was bolt-on, electric windows were introduced, the dash was wood-faced and comfort levels increased tenfold. Later Europas had more power to match their newfound creature comforts, but the Series 1 remains the choice for those dedicated to an uncompromising sports car.

—NICK KURCZEWSKI

MARKET

Christie's Collector Car Auction
at Rockefeller Center
New York
June 5

1955 Oldsmobile 98 Starfire convertible
Black, red leather seats with waffle-pattern centers. 324-cid, 202-hp Rocket V8, automatic. Fully optioned with power steering, brakes, windows and top, Autronic Eye headlight dimmer. Authentic spinner hubcaps. Restored a few years ago to a very high standard, hold-



ing up well. Complicated brightwork to dash excellent. An imposing, attractive car.
Sold at \$47,000

1955 was an excellent year for Oldsmobile, as it sold a record 583,179 cars and took fourth place overall in American production. The Starfire was Olds' top-of-the-line convertible, with just 9149 built at a base price of \$3,276. It was the most flamboyant car in the lineup, and a fully restored one makes a terrific cruiser. As the market wearies of being fascinated with 1955-58 Chevrolet convertibles, other, more luxurious marques from that era are perking up. In this case, you really would rather have your father's Oldsmobile. —KEITH MARTIN