



SHINY AND OLD This '53 Packard limo gleamed at last year's Empire Autorama.

VROOM WITH A VIEW

The Lambda Car Club puts classic autos in the spotlight this weekend at the second annual Empire Autorama **By Nick Kurczewski**



DUAL ENGINES Lambda's Mike Butler got an idea from Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney about how to snip the red tape barring the first Empire Autorama.

The Lambda Car Club is set to deliver a high-octane dose of gay pride to New York City. For more than 20 years, the group has catered to gay men who prefer the roar of a race car to the best of Babs, and this Saturday, the club's Empire Region will roll into Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza for its second annual Empire Autorama car show. Pride flags will fly from row upon row of gleaming classics and modern sports cars as the club celebrates its discrete corner of the community. But don't let the glitz fool you: The road to the Autorama has taken many twists and turns, and run across potholes and through detours.

"Hunky Pennsylvania Dutch boys" inspired Lambda Car Club founder and president emeritus John Ball to start the organization. In 1981, he'd been out for about four years but was still married, and his wife remained supportive, even helping with his entry into gay culture. Ball, who was in his mid-forties, was fast becoming disillusioned—he worried that he'd never find a loving relationship with a man. "I was looking for a boyfriend," the car buff says, "and I wanted to meet someone with the same interests."

In August of that year, Ball attended a car show and swap meet in Macungie, Pennsylva-

nia. As he was surrounded by hundreds of handsome, young, shirtless men, it struck him that someone, somewhere in that mass of shimmering flesh *had* to be gay. His wife suggested he put an ad in *Hemmings Motor News* for an openly gay car club. The monthly magazine is well known among classic-car fans, and Ball figured chances were good that some male readers enjoyed a nice set of pecs as much as they did a nice set of wheels. He contacted his friend Terry Ehrich, then the publisher of *Hemmings*, about placing an ad for a club called the Gay Old Car Owners Society. Ehrich (who died last year) was encouraging, and the ad "ended up in the Services Offered section," says Ball, now 67, with a laugh.

Numerous readers complained, he says, so the club's ad never ran again. The onetime placement, however, provided the spark needed to push Ball's project into high gear. He received dozens of letters from gay classic-car fans, all eager to meet other gay men with a similar passion. Ball excitedly went to work, organizing the first club event at a car show in Atlantic City in February 1982. The first 25 members met and held elections for officers at a gay-friendly bed-and-breakfast off the boardwalk.

PHOTOS: (TOP) STEVE HAYES; (BOTTOM) BEN MALEY

Attendance at the events that followed, in Rhinebeck, New York, and Hershey, Pennsylvania, attracted new members and resulted in a small alteration: Some members thought the Gay Old Car Owners Society's name was a bit too "in your face." (Booking a hotel in Hershey had proved troublesome.) The name was changed to the Lambda Car Club, which sent a familiar signal to men who might join; the Greek letter lambda has been used as a symbol of gay rights since at least the '70s. Twenty years later, the club is still bringing men together: Across the country, 29 chapters have formed, with nearly 2,000 members—about 100 of them in the Empire Region, which includes NYC, Long Island and northern New Jersey.

Longtime member Steve Hayes is a fixture of the local chapter, though he hasn't owned a car for decades. He holds an annual event at his Flatiron District apartment, where Lambda members pore over his collection of automotive literature. Hayes says Lambda has grown "enormously" since the first event he attended, in 1984, when, he recalls, "I was hooked."

Club member Mike Butler has done his part to fuel that growth. Just over a year ago, he envisioned the first Empire Autorama—a car show that would bring together men from Lambda's Empire Region while supporting the Turtle Bay neighborhood where he lives. Butler hoped to draw people to Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza, a

small park in the shadow of the United Nations complex, which has struggled to survive, especially after the city's parks-maintenance budget was reduced following the 2001 attacks; Butler estimates that nowadays, 90 percent of the park's funding comes from private contributions. Yet despite support from such neighborhood groups as Friends of Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza (of which he is now president) and the Turtle Bay Association, Butler encountered roadblocks that almost kept the first Autorama from taking place.

Given that privately owned cars are prohibited in NYC's public parks (except on roadways and in parking lots), and because of other regulations, it was questionable whether the show would ever get off the ground. Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney's quick thinking kept the event from stalling. In a meeting with her, Butler proposed the idea of the Empire Autorama and explained the legal hurdles he faced. She asked: If MoMA could display cars as pieces of art, why couldn't the Lambda Car Club exhibit vehicles not as cars but as rolling industrial sculptures? They'd found a solution. Holding permits that designated 12 cars as art, Lambda members parked them in the plaza last June; other vehicles lined the park's perimeter. The cars—many of them '50s classics with loud paint and yards of chrome—sparkled under sunny skies, and spectator turnout was strong.

This year's show promises to be more com-



SHAKE THAT BRASS The Lesbian and Gay Big Apple Corps will toot their horns at the Autorama.

prehensive, with nearly 50 cars, including Lambda member Andy Kollos's long, low pink '59 Ford Fairlane and Butler's classic '63 Lincoln Continental sedan (a.k.a. Maude). The Lesbian and Gay Big Apple Corps marching band will be on hand to serenade showgoers. Butler points out that "a car show appeals to a more conservative crowd." Then he laughs, concluding, "The focus is on cars. This is a different spin on gay pride."

The Empire Autorama is on Sat 28 at Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza, 47th St between First and Second Aves. 10am–5pm. FREE

BIKERS ISLAND

As always, the Sirens will lead the march in Manhattan. But that's not the only gay posse that's hell on two wheels.

By **Beth Greenfield** Photograph by **Miriam Romais**

Anyone who's ever stood along Fifth Avenue to watch the Gay Pride march knows that you hear it long before you see it. "You can hear us coming down that vast canyon," says Gigi Foster, president of the Sirens motorcycle club, the group of women that's helped to kick-start the parade with a thunderous rumble every year since forming in 1986. "Pride is the highlight of our year." But for members of local gay motorcycle groups, riding in queer spirit extends well beyond the last weekend in June.

"I've spent half my life in the club," says Mark Wind, an interfaith minister, a Harley-Davidson rider and the secretary of the gay men's Empire City Motorcycle Club, founded in 1964 (he became a member in 1975). Earlier this month, Wind presided over an annual motorcycle christening at the Eagle bar in Chelsea, where about 20 riders brought their bikes to have them blessed. The 25-member club is a close, fraternal organization that brings men together for socials, charity fund-raisers and rides upstate.

"At the time it was founded," Wind explains, "there were very few places besides bars where gay men could meet." With rules that require each member to own a bike (unlike some other gay biker clubs in the U.S.) and pledge his loyalty,

Empire City isn't for the fly-by-night enthusiast with a leather fetish. Plenty of members are attracted to the tough biker persona, but the biggest draws are riding and community. "For the most part, pledging involves getting to know the brothers," Wind says. "It's about camaraderie." Another NYC gay men's biker club, the City Cruisers, began about five years ago, after a handful of men left Empire City to form a less formal group; its rules are a bit more lenient, and the club, with its 20-odd members, focuses mainly on group rides.

Foster, a Sirens member for 13 years who rides a BMW Roadster and makes her living as an accountant for Barnes & Noble, says that hers is a tightly knit group—even more so since earlier this month, when a member was killed in a motorcycle accident on her way to work. "It was our first fatality in 16 years," she says, "and we've been very much a family." In addition to monthly meetings at the West Village LGBT Center, the 35 Sirens get together for frequent rides, often to benefit women's health organizations. Though the group is mainly made up of lesbians, Foster says, it is "a women's club first" and doesn't



HERE COMES THE PRIDE Empire City Motorcycle Club is not for the fly-by-night bike enthusiast.

discriminate based on sexual orientation.

The genders do sometimes mix, as Sirens meet for occasional billiards challenges, bowling parties and benefit rides with the members of Empire City. And though many Pride regulars may think only of women heading up the parade, the men are always right behind. The dykes on bikes usually number about 120, but about 50 gents follow—it's become tradition that leading the way is the women's domain.

"Heritage of Pride [the march organizer] was realizing in the '80s that women needed to be more visible, because it was such a male-dominated culture at that point," Foster explains. Nowadays, something would seem amiss if the Sirens weren't there, dramatically blazing a trail. As Foster puts it, "We are the parade."