

Merry Band of Misfits

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23/07/2019 The members of the R Gruppe in California have been indulging their special passion for Porsche for twenty years—and neither the weather nor other people's opinions make a shred of difference.

Prologue

You don't understand us. And it definitely has something to do with the weather. As Californians, all we know is sunshine. Apparently, someone found out that there's more rainfall in San Francisco Bay than in London. The only difference is that here, we get all that water practically all at once. Convertible tops? Always open. Weather forecast? Who needs it? We know it's going to be dry for the next few months. But then the rain comes. Every year in winter. Without warning. Before doing anything else, locals get their cars to safety. Anyone who drives in this weather is just plain crazy. Or one of us: a member of the R Gruppe.

Act I: Forever member 001

No one told him. And no one will ever be able to tell him that he's the first. Member number 001 was awarded posthumously to Steve McQueen, the undisputed King of Cool, the style icon brimming with virile, melancholy elegance, the heartthrob, the star, the race-car driver who remained true to himself: uncompromising, rebellious, stubborn. The California-based R Gruppe carries his iconic image around like a monstrance.

The spirit embodied by Steve McQueen in his films—the defiance, the rawness, the wild abandon—is the spirit shared by these unusual Porsche fans. "You do have to be a nonconformist to be one of us," says Cris Huergas, member number 002, cofounder and president. Huergas only looks earnest in pictures. If asked. He'd rather be having fun. Because he doesn't take life too seriously, let alone himself. Back in 1999, feeling more alarmed by the doomsayers themselves than the supposedly imminent apocalypse, he planted his very own tree in the road: a Porsche 911 S, model year 1969—or at any rate, what he made of it. With race locks and a low-slung, rough look, it's in the style of a classic racing machine that's done a few laps. Huergas interpreted the American hot rod of the 1950s for the contemporary world of Porsche. And while no one knows for certain where the term hot rod came from, there can be no doubt that this car fits the description. A car whose heat radiated all the way from Northern to Southern California, where former Porsche designer Freeman Thomas (003) had a similar idea in mind. And so it began.

The initial contact. Calls back and forth. And more soon join in—five more aficionados in the ranks. One of the first members is Jeff Zwart (011), a race-car driver and good friend of Thomas's. Zwart drove some rallies and on the track, but his true métier is the mountains. He scored multiple class wins in the legendary Pikes Peak International Hill Climb; few have driven the 156 turns over an elevation gain of nearly 1,500 meters, up to the clouds, so often or so rapidly. Twenty kilometers in well under ten minutes.

The R Gruppe takes shape. In homage to the 1967 Porsche 911 R, they purposely opt for the German *Gruppe* rather than "group." Fitted with a 906 Carrera 6 engine, it's the R Gruppe's cult object and role model for admission to the group: all Porsches up to 1973. If the enthusiasts have a motto, it's this: "Never forget what a sports car was built for—sporty driving." Coming from Huergas, it sounds like a mantra.

The first *Treffen* —not "meeting"—is held in mid-2000 at a small hotel in Cambria, California, halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. The initiators expect thirty cars, tops. Some one hundred Porsches show up. Then, as now, neither the cars nor the members are what you might call mainstream. They have to be cool, somehow, like McQueen's turtleneck in the *Bullitt* Mustang or the overall appearance of Magnus Walker, fashion designer and author of *Urban Outlaw.* There are only ever three hundred members. That's the limit. It's not about exclusion; it's a question of cohesion. "The R Gruppe isn't just a club," explains Huergas. "It's a brotherhood." To keep things lively, it has to stay active. Anyone who doesn't actively participate is shown the door. The next in line—there's a numbering

system—takes their place.

In truth, the R Gruppe pioneers expected interest in the community to taper off at some point. By now it's clear, however, that they've become a subculture. It could easily be ten times the size, even though—or perhaps precisely because—it's by no means universally admired. Some in high-flying circles can't stand them, regarding the group as a gaggle of wannabe race-car drivers. Others pooh-pooh the group for its unwillingness to adhere to the regulatory finer points of established owner clubs. Still others sniff that the cars are cheap replicas. Huergas can only laugh at the critics. He says, frankly, "I don't give a damn."

Act II: On the importance of not being earnest

The clubhouse of the R Gruppe is more of an open house than a fortified castle. Getting there is EASY. The acronym stands for European Auto Salvage Yard, a Porsche mecca in the small Californian town of Emeryville, directly on San Francisco Bay, between Oakland and Berkeley. The yard is just down the road from Pixar Animation Studios, the place where animated dreams like *Finding Nemo* and *Toy Story* are born. EASY, by contrast, is a place where dreams once came to die: a salvage business specializing in Porsche vehicles that met with less glamorous fortunes beneath the sunny California skies. While the salvage business closed in 2017, the grounds are still a place of pilgrimage for the Porsche faithful. It's where the members of the R Gruppe—and many other Bay Area Porsche enthusiasts—have met on the first Saturday morning of every month. For twenty years.

It happens to be raining on this particular morning, which may explain why only half the usual crowd is on hand. The "normals" are missing, says Huergas—the collectors and guests who clean their cars with Q-tips if it comes to that. Not the R Gruppe: they're ready to rumble in any weather. The members trickle into the yard. A roar, far off at first, quickly approaching, a pump of the pedal, headlights swinging around the corner, the arrival. Again and again. Fogged-up windows conceal the interiors of the sports cars. The jovial back-and-forth of good-natured ribbing begins as soon as a driver steps out and joins the assembled.

It's all old hat for Rick Spinali (720). Everyone knows one of his legs is shorter than the other; that's why he welded a second clutch pedal on top of the first. But the questions about it are part of the greeting ritual. His 1969 Porsche 912 will certainly not win any beauty contests, but it won't lose any drag races either. And there's no ribbing on that point—only admiration.

It's not easy to make fun of Jeff Saccullo (750) or his 1960 Porsche 356—he usually beats you to the punch. Saccullo is quick to joke and laugh at himself. He calls his 356 his "warthog—it's just ugly," he says. But he loves it all the same. Or more accurately: because of it. Saccullo doesn't hold back with the gibes himself, particularly toward those who don't drive in the rain because their cars would get dirty: "What is wrong with you guys?"

Steve Hatch (746) pulls in just as the heaviest downpour of the day is upon them. Commotion and

applause greet his arrival. They hadn't expected him to show up, or more precisely, to pull his car out of the garage. Built in 1970, Hatch's 911 is a beauty, a marvel in orange that one would sooner expect to see in the Concours d'Elegance in Pebble Beach, with a painted sunset and a gentle sea breeze completing the scene. And Hatch did in fact wonder if he should venture out—not because of the miserable weather, but because he wasn't entirely sure whether the windshield wipers work. He had never used them before. Neither had the previous owner. The old boy obsessed on perfecting the car, and even read Hatch the riot act once for having the temerity to wash the Porsche with water. With ordinary water, yet! "He'd probably drop dead on the spot if he knew what I was doing here today in this weather," Hatch laughs. Be that as it may, the windshield wipers are purring like a cat.

Act III: The law of the road

At last, it's time to drive. Not home, mind you—this is no tea party. Eighteen classic Porsches part the waters on the road and follow the strip of asphalt known as Claremont Avenue straight up into the Berkeley Hills. There are few things in life more fun than an open, winding road with a rear engine and a fine-tuned foot on the gas pedal. Steering rear axle? In a certain way, Porsche has always had it.

As the thirty-strong group pulls up to a small restaurant for lunch, one detail speaks volumes: no one had thought to make a reservation. Tables are hastily pushed together. "Mayhem is part of the R Gruppe thing," explains Saccullo with a big smile. "You're going to leave a little mark so that people know you were there."

Epilogue

The people out there don't get us. We're the R Gruppe. We don't follow any rules but the ones we give ourselves. But you, you get us now. We're Porsche drivers. You, us, three hundred, three thousand, three million, whatever: all of us.

Info

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