

Restoring a Jamaican

By Bill Spohn

The Fiberfab Jamaican body was sold from 1968 for fitment to existing MGA, Austin-Healey and Triumph chassis after most of the original body had been removed. It was later offered for use on VW floorpans as well as with a new chassis built by Fiberfab to take V8 power. They rather cleverly utilised a windshield from a 1965 Corvette, side windows and hardware from a 1960s Karman Ghia, and a rear window from a Porsche 911, and while obviously a 'bitsa' by nature, the end result works better aesthetically than just about any other kit car I can bring to mind.

Of all the donor chassis, the MGA is perhaps the best suited. It had inherently good handling, (something the Triumph certainly lacked) the frame was, if anything, over-specified so it was amply strong for use with more power (many of these projects were also intended to have engine swaps to something more powerful), and it lacked the system of body support work welded to the chassis that makes restoration of the Austin-Healey such an expensive chore, although that latter chassis does offer more room for those intent on using seriously large engines.

This particular car was created about 1969 and uses an early Jamaican body without the fender flairs and embellishments present on some later bodies. The base car was an early 1957 MGA 1500 roadster. I was drawn to this particular project because my long experience with MGAs made it an interesting challenge.

The car ran, after a fashion, with a tired 1500 engine, a dashboard with every light and switch (mostly unmarked) possible, a gold shag interior, and white and gold shell seats. It looked rather like the previous owner had gone through J. C. Whitney with a giant electromagnet and had put whatever stuck into this car. The decision to rip all of that out was an easy one and after stripping the car completely the restoration could begin. It turned out to be in quite good condition, probably because it saw limited use after it was originally built.

For an engine, the compact and lightweight GM V6 was the immediate best choice as I was also familiar with them. While many prefer the alloy Rover V-8, partially because there is the connection with MGBs, as the factory briefly used them in that model, and partly because some

people just like V-8s, the GM V-6 has the same weight, same sort of power output, yet has a smaller envelope, being a 60 degree V engine and two cylinders shorter than the wider 90 degree V8. This makes a difference in an MGA as space is tighter than in the MGB.

I opted for a 3.4 engine from a 1994 Camaro, and did much studying and asking of questions with the various experienced manufacturers of kits and parts for this swap in MGBs. While there is no well established program for MGAs as there is for MGBs (they are basically a bolt in proposition at this point, when you order one of the several available engine swap kits), I was able to take a bit from here, a bit from there, and a bunch of bits from thin air as I created the necessary mounts and ancillaries for this engine. My experience gained by racing an MGA for over 30 years certainly came in handy.

In modified form these V-6 engines, which weigh about the same as the MGA engine, can be made to approach 200 BHP with more than double the torque of the original MG motor, and are ample for a fun street car. More is available with a higher state of tune or forced induction, but as I

intended to keep the MG rear end without limited slip, I felt 300 BHP might be a little over the top.

I decided to use a Borg Warner T5 manual transmission out of a V8 Camaro (I prefer the closer gear ratios of that version to the bull low on most of the transmissions that came with V-6 engines in Camaros, Blazers, and such), and also used the original MGA rear axle with a

3.9 MGB diff—a simple 'pumpkin swap' as I happened to have some spare fine spline MGA Mk II axles. The result was a great combination of excellent acceleration and long relaxed top end in fifth OD.

Brakes were upgraded and as I was running low on spare MGA discs brake components, I used MGB uprights, brakes, and shocks, while retaining the MGA rear drum brakes so as to have a good working hand brake, something difficult to achieve if you switch to rear discs. I wanted to retain wire wheels in order to keep the vintage look of the car, so I fitted Triumph wire wheel adaptors to the MGB front hubs (didn't have any wire wheel MGB hubs handy) and kept the original MGA wire wheel rear hubs. The body is wider than an MGA, and the original

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Caution: MGA purists may want to skip this article! -Editor

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wire wheels looked definitely tucked under and too narrow track, so I ordered some 6" chrome Dayton wheels built for the AC Cobra, centre-laced with more outward offset, and some 215 x 60-15 Yokohama tires. Having gone that far, I decided to do some of the suspension modifications I do on the race MGA to enhance handling. The car is slightly lowered with stiffer front springs and added negative camber, and a $\frac{3}{4}$ " front sway bar completes the chassis modification I have found I like on my street MGs.

I created an interior from scratch centred around some Miata seats, one of the few seats that will fit the narrow confines between the MGA chassis rails. They also had to be reclinable in order to clear the low roof line of this car, which is so low (1" lower than a Ferrari Dino) that they cut down the MG heater box $1\frac{1}{2}$ " to fit under the body. The previous owner had "lowered" the oil filler cap on the rocker cover of the MGA engine by beating on it with a hammer!

New interior panels were made and covered to match the seats in tan, and I installed a carpet set made partly from an MGA replacement set and partly custom cut from bulk. I ripped out the dash with all the switches and lights and installed a modified MGA coupe dash which made things feel a lot more familiar.

The engine was rebuilt with suitable modifications to bring power up from 160 BHP to approximately 200 BHP (this involved a larger throttle body, lots of head and intake and exhaust porting and a different camshaft) and I resurfaced the top of the upper plenum and had the MG and octagon machined into it, copied from one of my spare MGA Twincam cam covers. I elected to retain fuel injection both for drivability and to attain a low engine profile. (One can't hammer on this engine until it fits under the bonnet).

It had only one paint job from new, a rather uninspiring gold colour reminiscent of Jim Rockford's Camaro. What

colour to repaint it was considered for many months, ending up with a pure red – BMW Imola Red.

The result was gratifying. The engine fired up at the first push of the starter button (I'd kept a separate starter switch to resemble the stock item, but used a pushbutton switch rather than a pull cable). The modern engine harness and the original style wiring harness for everything else – mostly lighting and instruments – got along together and very little work was needed to get everything except the electronic speedometer working (it still continues to defy me).

The handling is every bit as good as I expect any properly prepared MGA to be and with the new sticky rubber, it handily exceeds normal MGBs and MGAs in terms of ability to stick to the road. The straight through exhaust (2 1/2") also works well. At low engine speeds the exhaust note is moderate – nothing more than one expects from a sports car. When you step on it from around 3000 RPM, it wails much more loudly and the car moves out quite smartly given that it handily equals the power to weight ratio of some 1960s small block Corvettes.

It has been a lot of fun, and I don't feel like a butcher as I didn't take a nice stock MGA and modify it – someone else had 'pre-butchered' it and I just started where they left off. I suppose it is halfway between restoring a regular car and building a traditional hot rod, and I enjoyed the year and a half project. I removed and replaced every single part on the car except for the frame and body, and the rear axle housing.

If you want to see more pictures of the process, they are posted at <www.rhodo.citymax.com/Jamaican.html>. I do not suggest that anyone sacrifice an MGA to do this, even if you could find an unused Jamaican body, but if you ever did see a converted car that was derelict, abandoned, or in need of some TLC, this should give you an idea of what the end product of an extensive refurbishment could be. ♦

