



# The Transformer

Bill Spohn's MGA-based Fiberfab Jamaican represents the very best in classic kitcar design. He's since made a fine job of restoring this example, and of developing it further with a modern V6 powerplant.

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here are few visually talented kitcar designers. Jeremy Phillips (Sylva Stylus, [www.sylva.co.uk](http://www.sylva.co.uk)) and Dennis Adams (Marcos, [www.rory.uk.com](http://www.rory.uk.com)) are a couple, but they represent maybe 1% of those who have designed, made and occasionally sold their own cars. I've done it myself (the Brookland Swallow, story on [www.miniresto.com](http://www.miniresto.com)), which is why I

appreciate the significant skill and talent that went into the Fiberfab Jamaican. I know how extremely difficult it is to adapt a design to fit an available windscreen without making it look grotesque. A few inches wrong and the harmony of the original concept is replaced with distortion and lumps.

Having a compound-curved windscreen manufactured for a small company was never an option in the 1960s: the process used to be so expensive that even Rolls-Royce used flat side-window glass until 1966.

The windscreen on the Jamaican is from a Chevrolet Corvette, and its use in the Jamaican is very nearly perfect. At the very bottom in the middle of the screen, the body shape has been adapted slightly to the screen shape because it's tipped backwards at a steeper angle than in the Corvette. The rest of the glasshouse is perfect, though – the rear window is Porsche 911, and it has been blended into the roofline faultlessly. A flattish rear screen has to look flat but cannot actually be flat, or it looks weird. The designer William Towns (Aston Martin V8,

**Above: Bill Spohn has stripped off all badges, side repeater lights and trim, reduced the size of the sidelights and left the body shape to speak for itself.**







**Above:** From the side, the proportions are pretty well perfect. There is no clue to the jumble-sale glasshouse.

**Below:** GM's 3.4-litre V6 has been treated to a Crane cam, an oversized plenum chamber and some porting and polishing, yielding around 200bhp and some very decent low-end grunt.

Aston Lagonda, Jensen-Healey) once told me never to use a straight line on a car design; his lines look straight but aren't.

The functional side windows on the Jamaican are curved Volkswagen Karmann Ghia, and although they're not the right shape, a clever styling feature at the back of the door and window frame covers this up and adds a distinctive and distinctively Italian flourish to the styling.

The overall shape is really a beauty. The front is possibly a little oversimplified, but the proportions, the haunches and the rear are as good as anything from Lamborghini or Maserati. Indeed, something Bill enjoyed greatly recently was parking his car at an Italian car show and listening to the crowd trying to figure out whether it was an Abarth or a prototype Bizzarrini or what. It didn't even occur to anyone that it wasn't Italian.

Dynamically, the car performs as well as it looks. All-up weight is 2100lbs, and the General Motors V6 (after some help from Bill) produces about 200bhp. With a fruity roar from the slightly inadequate silencer, the beast launches itself very respectably onto the Vancouver freeway, the roar fading to a quiet growl as it relaxes into a stroll. The car has very long legs with five gears including a seriously overdriven top ratio, and with 3.4-litres it has enough grunt to carry this high gearing without effort. It's also slippery in aerodynamic terms: the designer had no access to a wind-tunnel, but anything this low with this sort of screen rake is going to have a fairly good CD.

The handling is also good. The structure is tight and stiff with no squeaks or creaks, and Bill says it still feels like an

## Fiberfab

Fiberfab was an American company founded by Warren Goodwin in 1964. He had already established a British connection by importing and then licensing the Microplas Mistral



GRP sports car body which originated in Uxbridge, Middlesex. He then moved on with his Jamaican body conversion in 1968 which was fitted to British rolling chassis - Triumph TR3 and TR4, MGA and Austin-Healey. It was also later widened and developed for V8 power with its own chassis. If, having read this story, you find you need one, they do come up for sale in North America sometimes as a good few were sold and many remain unfinished. At the time of writing there's an unbuilt Jamaican body kit for sale at Giordano's Vintage Motors near Seattle for \$1750 ([www.giocars.com](http://www.giocars.com)).

Kit car manufacturers are often way ahead of production car design. The Jamaican, designed by American Chris Beebe, looked like 1970s Italian exotica and could have been designed by Intermeccanica or Bizzarrini. The Kellison was a similar exercise on British chassis from ten years earlier, and was also ten years ahead of its time.

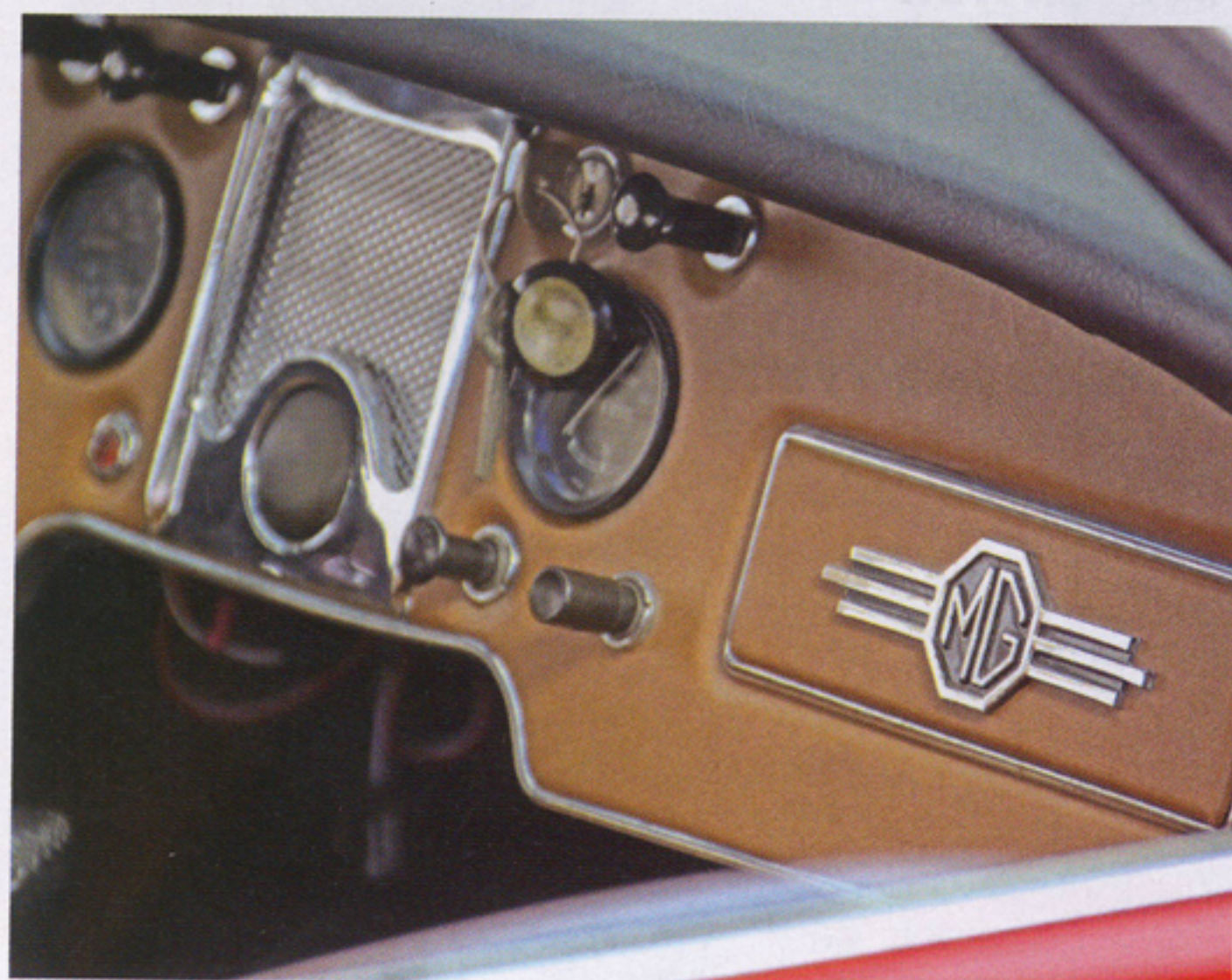
Fiberfab was sold to a Florida kitcar company in 1983, which later went bust. The company also made GT40 lookalikes, which are still available from enthusiasts trading as Fiberfab.



MGA. The chassis remains standard, and there are only minor upgrades to the suspension and braking in the form of MGB discs and uprights plus an anti-roll bar. The ride is firm but not unpleasant, and with the comfortable Mazda seats you could happily take this car touring. Bill and his wife do just that - the local MG club is happy to accept the Jamaican as an MG, and they go away on trips with the club. The only downside is luggage capacity, as a spare tyre occupies most of the available space behind the seats and there's no bootlid.

Most cars that look like this are quite a bit bigger, and the dramatically low roofline reduces headroom below a reasonable height, although the successful glasshouse design avoids it being claustrophobic. The Mazda MX5 seats can't be used in anything like an upright position or they, and your head, would hit the roof. They are canted way back, so the driving position is almost prone. Getting in is actually





something of a performance, particularly if your life has been going on for a number of decades and has involved any significant quantities of the three male food groups of steak, chips and beer. The designer was definitely young, weighed 140lbs and stood 5ft 8in high. All kitcars are sized to fit their designer, because he uses his own body as the sample.

Once inside, this Jamaican is a very pleasant place to be. The dashboard that came with the kit was rather dull, with random scattered flick-switches and Dymo-tape labelling, so Bill replaced it with the steel dash from an MGA coupé, which ended up trimmed in leather and looking gorgeous, and which also connects the interior of the car to its roots. It's still an MGA, and Bill is still an MG enthusiast. His wife Suzanne is as well: she drives an MGC with a triple carb conversion.

When Bill bought the Jamaican, it was quite nasty. It was painted gold, with gold shag carpet inside and white-and-gold seats, plus many shiny chrome accessories. As Bill is a lawyer and not a pimp, this didn't appeal. As he puts it: 'It was as if the builder had gone through JC Whitney (for which read Halfords) with a giant electromagnet and fitted everything that stuck to it.' After Bill had taken off all the shiny decorations, the body was full of small holes so it was time for new paint anyway. In the end a deep BMW red called Imola was chosen.

The interior was also headed for the skip, and Bill decided to replace it with the excellent and fairly easily available tan leather seats from a posh version of the Mazda MX5, and to build a tan interior around those. Tan and rich red are hard to beat, and are also a common Italian colour combo.

The car was stripped right down to the very good 1957 chassis and bare 1969 fibreglass body. The uprating of the rolling chassis was kept within unspoken MG-enthusiast rules by using traditional MGB-based parts, really just equipping the already good MGA dynamics with better brakes and sharper cornering. There was and is nothing wrong with the original banjo live axle, so it was left alone. But the elderly and wheezing 1500cc B-series engine that came with the Jamaican wasn't really going to cut it with that body styling, was it? Even after a rebuild and a seeing-to, the cheery baritone burble of a long-stroke British straight-four is just too tweedy to sound right in something that looks Italian and exotic. An operatic diva V12 is what you would expect.

Bill actually owns an Italian exotic, a very rare Lamborghini Isola with many cams and cylinders and even twin distributors, but rather than using something many-cylindereed, pericard and Mediterranean in the Jamaican, he went for Detroit and a fairly current V6. This is an engine that has powered many Camaros, the recently-retired Pontiac Solstice which disappeared with the Pontiac brand name, and assorted vans and shopping cars. It's quite a popular choice as a North American replacement for MGB engines because it's very compact, easily available with a five-speed gearbox for rear-drive applications, and it's also

**Above:** Plenum chamber has been treated to convincing MG octagon logos, causing major confusion and puzzlement among MG enthusiasts unfamiliar with the General Motors V6.

**Above left:** Interior has been designed around a pair of tan leather Mazda MX5 seats, which are reclined way back to avoid touching the roof.

**Middle left:** Dashboard was rescued from a scrap MGA coupé. It has been adapted to fit the Fibreglass body, and then trimmed in tan leather.

**Left:** Bill Spohn, who spotted a diamond in the rough and has recut and polished it very nicely indeed. >





**Above: The Jamaican as bought. Even in a fairly nasty colour it still doesn't look bad, does it?**

**Below: Tail arrangements are simple, and Ferrari-style tail lights are sourced from something entirely prosaic. Do any readers recognise what?**

cheap, reliable and quite powerful. 200bhp is easy, and 300bhp is within reasonable reach. The MGA chassis is tighter for space than the MGB, so the shorter the engine the better. The weight is the same as the original cast-iron four, so apart from a small improvement achieved by moving the engine mass slightly backwards towards the middle of the car, the balance is not significantly changed.

Fitting the engine provided no problems – get the Camaro gear lever in the right place, as far back as is comfortable, then make a gearbox mount and adapt a pair of engine mounts – Jaguar in this case – and weld them to the chassis. Make a propshaft and tidy up as required. A nice touch was to get a techy friend to program a serious milling machine to engineer MG octagon cutouts copied from a Twin-Cam MG into the cast alloy plenum chamber. These look real, and have caused much confusion among MG people. What? Did MG make an injected V6? When? What's going on?

Full details of the conversion are on [www.BritishV8.com](http://www.BritishV8.com), but don't look at the site if you're a purist as there will be much to upset you. On the other hand, most of the MG conversions there are superbly executed, so perhaps you'll end up granting them grudging admiration. In the case of this car, the new body is as pleasing as the old one was, and the restoration/conversion has yielded an excellent car. We like it.

## TECHSPEC ENGINE

General Motors 3.4L V6 with multipoint fuel injection, upgraded to a (larger) 62mm throttle body. Ported and blended heads and plenum chamber. Crane 272 cam. GM wiring harness. Single wire alternator. Standard MGA fuel tank, Holley 'red top' fuel pump to a fuel accumulator, and Walbro external high pressure fuel injection pump to the fuel rail. Afco alloy crossflow radiator. Electric fan controlled by ECM, with override switch on dashboard. 2.5in single exhaust system with Magnaflow silencer and Pacesetter split-tip resonator. About 200bhp.

## TRANSMISSION

Borg-Warner T5 5-speed (from a 1989 Chevrolet Camaro V8) with 0.63:1 top gear. Camaro (V6) clutch. MGA master cylinder. TR6 slave cylinder. Custom driveshaft. MGA banjo axle with (MGB) 3.909:1 final drive ratio and open differential.

## SUSPENSION

Front: MGB uprights, ¾in anti-roll bar.  
Rear: Standard MGA leaf springs.

## BRAKES

MGB discs front, MGA drums rear.

## WHEELS AND TYRES

Dayton 6J x 15 wire wheels with Yokohama ES100 215/60 x 15 tyres.

## INTERIOR

MGA coupé dashboard. Original MGA instruments, except for VDO electronic tachometer and GPS-based speedometer. Leather Mazda MX5 seats bolted to custom steel strapping welded to the frame (instead of the plywood floor.) Custom interior finishing panels, carpet and headliner. Custom transmission tunnel.

