



# TOM DANIEL

The most popular fantasy-car designer is back!

BY AARON SMITH | PHOTOS BY DIE CAST X TEAM & COURTESY OF TOM DANIEL

Monogram Models owes much of its success in the 1960s and '70s to the inspiring and creative designer Tom Daniel. Chances are, you've seen something that has been graced with the wild, distinctive "TD" touch. Anyone who built model kits during Daniel's time with Monogram, or read *Hot Rod*, *Car Craft*, or *Rod & Custom*, or watched the "The Munsters" on television has seen his work. Daniel's designs have influenced several generations of model and full-scale hot-rod builders, and he isn't ready to hang up his drawing board just yet.

Daniel got his start in automotive design shortly after World War II during an era when the car culture in Southern California was booming. "When I was in junior high and early high school, I started seeing custom cars on the streets, and they just caught my eye," recalls Daniel. "I thought they were really cool; I just naturally started drawing them."

Although he was primarily a Blue Oval guy while growing up, Daniel eventually decided to switch marques. "I was pretty much in the Ford camp early on. That gradually changed, and when I decided to become a car

designer, I wanted to work for GM," he recalls. During a high school field trip to the Art Center School of Los Angeles (now the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena), Daniel realized exactly what he needed to do to achieve his goal. Not usually in the practice of accepting applicants directly out of high school, the Art Center was so impressed by Daniel's portfolio that they made an exception and admitted him. "It all worked out because GM hired me," says Daniel.

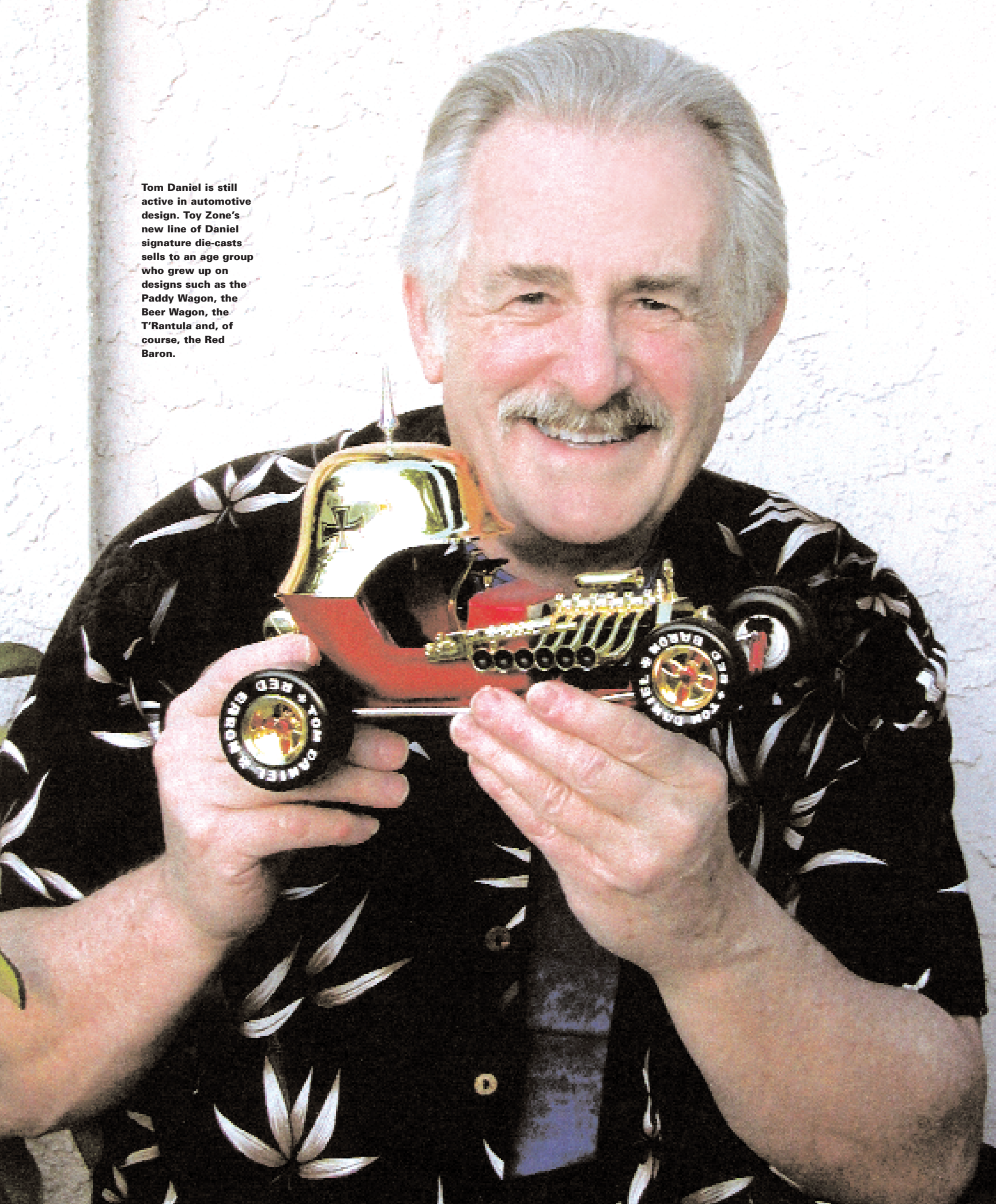
Daniel started getting paid for his designs even before he had finished school. The art director

of *Rod & Custom*, Lynn Wineland, contacted him about doing custom hot-rod sketches for the magazine. The feature was called "Off the Sketchpad," and it was so popular that it was soon featured in nearly every other Petersen automotive publication. Although the salary wasn't great, "It helped pay for school," Daniel says with a laugh.

GM hired Daniel immediately following graduation from the Art Center. For several years, he designed components and sketched concepts of future vehicles for GM in Detroit. While he loved working for GM,

his wife wanted to return to California. To keep the peace, Daniel moved the family back to the West Coast. He says, "If it hadn't been for that, I would be retiring from GM about now, but then the whole model thing would never have happened." Daniel, a Naval Air Reservist, was called to active duty during the Cuban missile crisis just weeks after he left GM. Following his military discharge, he worked as a design engineer for North American Aviation, where he designed several components for the Apollo space program. In his spare time, Daniel

Tom Daniel is still active in automotive design. Toy Zone's new line of Daniel signature die-casts sells to an age group who grew up on designs such as the Paddy Wagon, the Beer Wagon, the T'Rantula and, of course, the Red Baron.



# LEGENDS

TOM DANIEL

created new “Off the Sketchpad” articles for *Rod & Custom* magazine. His feature eventually evolved to include reviews and sketches of new model kits. This caught the attention of Monogram’s model shop supervisor, Roger Harney, who got approval to have Daniel create new model designs. His first was “Beer Wagon.” When it was later released as a die-cast by Johnny Lightning, it was renamed a more child-friendly “Root Beer Wagon” to comply with federal rules regarding children’s toys. It was soon followed by “Red Baron.” These

initial designs were instant hits, and each sold a couple of million copies.

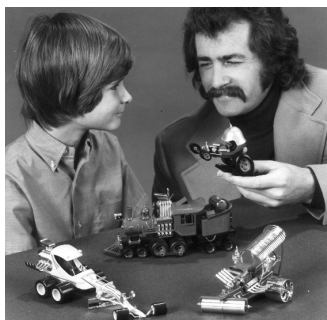
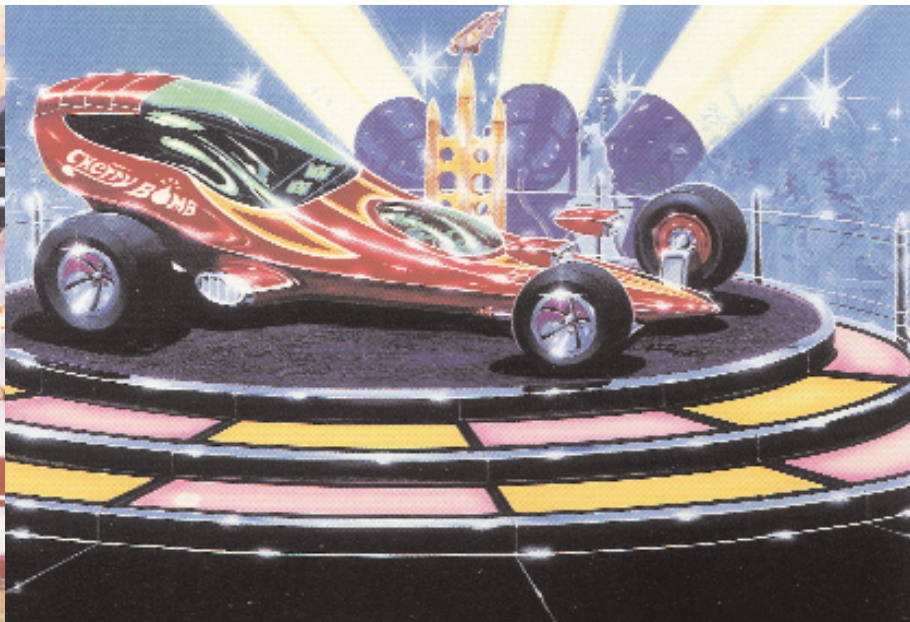
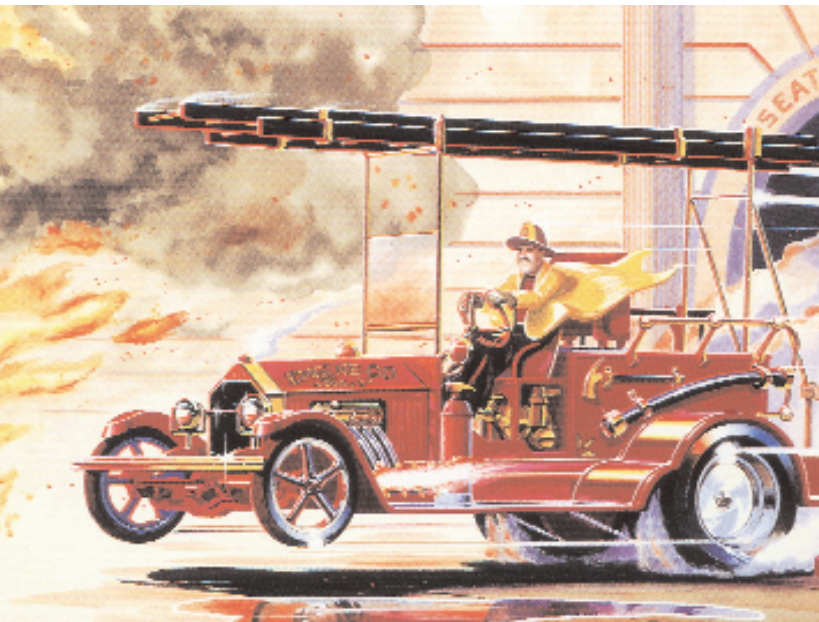
Monogram was delighted by the success of these kits and went on to commission Daniel to create more than 75 other designs between 1968 and 1975. These kits included “S’cool Bus” (a school bus-cum-hot rod featuring twin Hemi engines and a funny-car-style lift-up body), “T’rantula” (a low-slung drag racer with exhaust pipes like spider legs), “Dragon Wagon” (a hot-rod circus wagon with pipe-organ velocity stacks and a fire-breathing dragon caged in the rear) and

“Bad Medicine” (a medicine-delivery drag racer piloted by a skeleton). Not all of Daniel’s designs were as outrageous as these, but he notes, “As far as

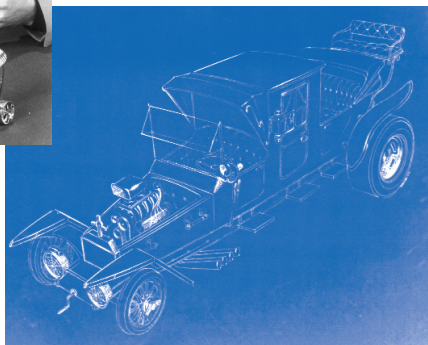
overnight. George Barris hired Daniel to come up with the design for a TV show in a hurry, and although Barris often gets the credit for the creation, he



Tom Daniel’s street car had to be as cool as the model kits for which he was famous. His Street Vette was as hip as a street car could be and still be drivable. The car spawned a model kit, and Tom still owns it and has plans to restore it.



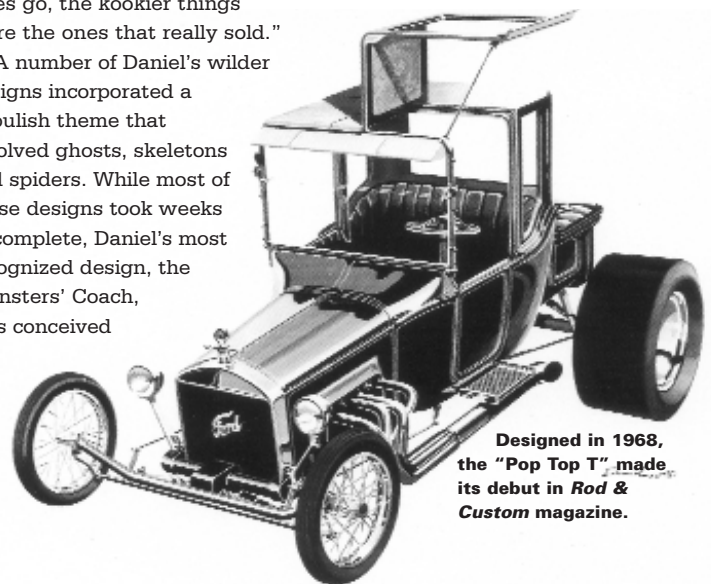
Left: by 1972, Tom Daniel was the foremost designer of wild customs, and Monogram exploited his designs to the full. Mattel purchased Monogram and all of its designs, and the Red Baron became the most produced custom in toy and kit form.



Right: when George Barris faced a time crunch, he turned to Tom Daniel to design a kooky car for a new television show. The result was the Munster Coach. Although it was modified, it was built almost as you see it here.

sales go, the kookier things were the ones that really sold.”

A number of Daniel’s wilder designs incorporated a ghoulish theme that involved ghosts, skeletons and spiders. While most of these designs took weeks to complete, Daniel’s most recognized design, the Munsters’ Coach, was conceived



Designed in 1968, the “Pop Top T” made its debut in *Rod & Custom* magazine.

was simply the one who built it. "The Munsters' [Coach] preceded all that line of design ... obviously, you can see the lineage in all that stuff from the Munsters' Coach," noted Daniel.

A few of Daniel's creations have been reproduced in full scale, including the "Red Baron," "Sand Crab" and, of course, the "Munsters' Coach." Building the "Red Baron" proved to be a bigger challenge than Detroit customizer Chuck Miller had bargained for. First, the Mercedes aircraft engine featured in the model was too large. Daniel ran into the same problem when he designed the

Having done the bulk of his designing in the days before the personal computer, Daniel still creates all of his designs by hand. "The people I've seen use the computer to design, I can design something faster than them and just as accurately on my old board. In

resurgence to the large number of designers working today and recalls, "When I was with GM, there were only fifteen of us."



**From concept to plastic to die-cast. Bad medicine is one of Toy Zone's new 1:18 Tom Daniel designs. It's a well-done fantasy car with a detailed blown engine and a casting that really shows its designer's wild imagination.**



**Left to right: although not yet in die-cast form, this tricked-out fire truck would surely be popular. Note the ultra-large wheels—a visionary feature 35 years ago. ▢ During the wild '70s, the custom car show circuit was a great attraction, especially during winter. The Cherry Bomb was Tom Daniel's answer to the crazy customs created by Ed Roth a decade earlier. ▢ Tom Daniel loved speed—especially drag racing. This is his illustration of the late Gary Gabelich at the legendary Lion's Drag Strip. ▢ One of the wild creations that made it into plastic and, later, into die-cast was "Bad Medicine"—a ghoulish C-cab rail dragster.**

model and had to scale down the engine to make it fit. In the end, Miller decided to go with a Pontiac overhead-cam six-cylinder. A keen eye will notice that the exhaust on the full-scale version exits on the opposite side of the engine from where it does on the model. Another problem Miller encountered involved the large chrome helmet roof. The helmet was far too large to chrome at the time, so he had to settle for silver paint.

fact, the drawing board I do most of my work on is still the same one that I carried under my arm to the Art Center."

A lot has changed in the automotive world since Daniel first started designing. When asked about the design of today's vehicles, Daniel replied, "I think this is a renaissance, and Chrysler has led the way, with Ford following and GM playing catch-up." He attributes some of this

Daniel recently moved to Kanab, Utah, where he's building a shop and working on new designs. His California Street Vette, on which the model kit was based, is still in his possession, and although he admits that it has fallen into disrepair after some tight years in the '80s, he plans to bring it back to its original glory. "The Vette, when we get it redone with my designs, will be back on the cover of some

magazines," Daniel says. Keeping the Corvette company in his garage is his 1966 Chevy Longbed pickup. Few people know this, but Daniel contributed to its design when he was with GM. "For the '61 through '66 GMC and Chevrolet trucks, the one production item I did for GM when I worked in Advanced Truck was the hood," he recounts. "I've always wanted one."

In addition to being an

automotive enthusiast, Daniel is passionate about model railroading and is currently creating designs for scale railroad companies. He designed scenery backgrounds for his own company, HO West; they were bought by and are still marketed by the Instant Horizons brand. Of course, who could forget "Honest Engine"—the imposing locomotive with its fat drag slicks and monstrous blown Hemi engine?

Original Monogram kits of Daniel's designs are hard to find and fetch quite a bit on eBay these days, although you can find many of his most popular designs affordably priced in 1:64-, 1:43- and 1:18-scale die-casts. He is now working with Toy Zone, Mattel, Revell-Monogram and Johnny Lightning, "And I paint when I can," he says. As for the future, he has some new unpublished designs that he'd like to see brought to scale. "It's amazing that all the old designs I did thirty-five years ago and more are still popular, but I just think there's a big opportunity to come out with some brand-new tools. It's satisfy-



With George Barris, Tom Daniel greeted attendees at the 2005 *Die Cast X* Expo in Anaheim, California. His signature customs have been brought to life in 1:18-, 1:43- and 1:64-scale die-casts.

ing that all those designs have brought so much pleasure to people around the world."

Few people have had the kind of impact on automotive design that Tom Daniel has had over the past four decades. His designs have made a lasting impression on those who grew up building them, and he continues to attract new fans. In the world of die-cast, Tom Daniel is truly legendary, and we look forward to seeing which wild creations he has waiting in the wings. For more information and memorabilia, go to [tomdaniel.com](http://tomdaniel.com).

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