

THE LEGENDARY

Tom Daniel



Meet the Design Genius Behind Some of the Best-Selling Kits of All Time

Don Abood

If you grew up in the Sixties, read *Rod & Custom*, and built model cars, you know the name Tom Daniel.

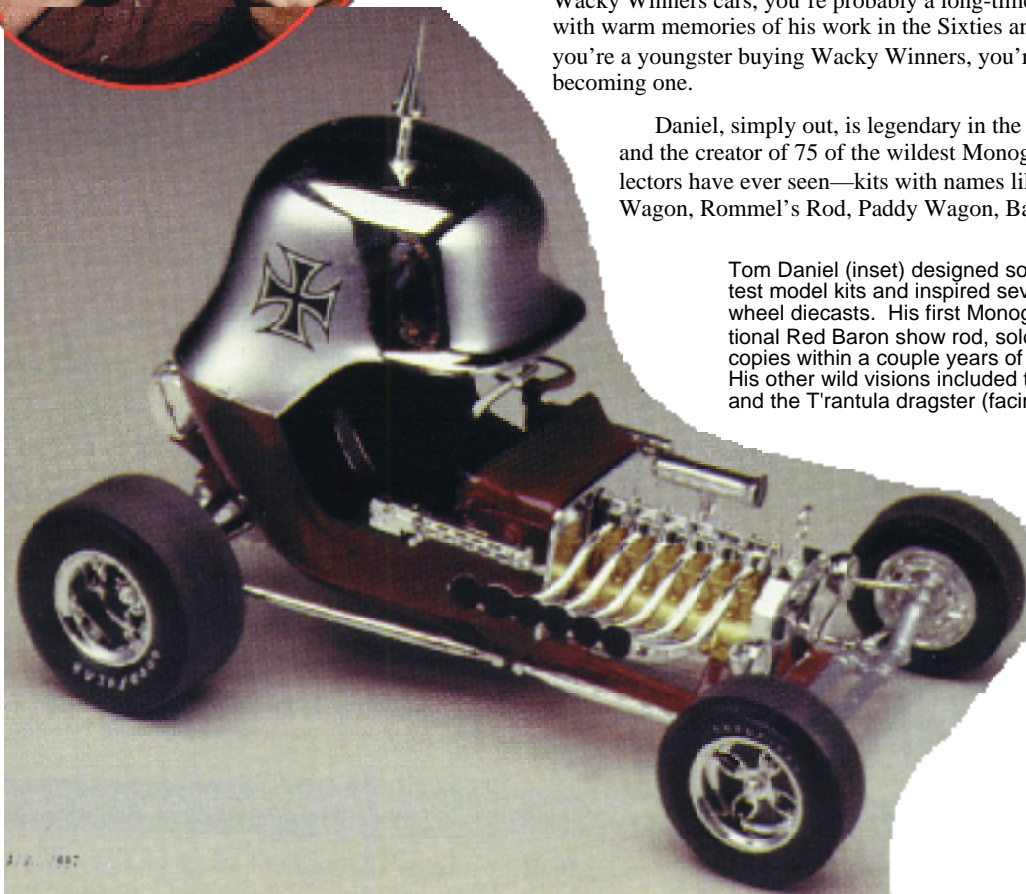
If you collect Hot Wheels and have an original Red Baron, you're probably familiar with Tom Daniel.

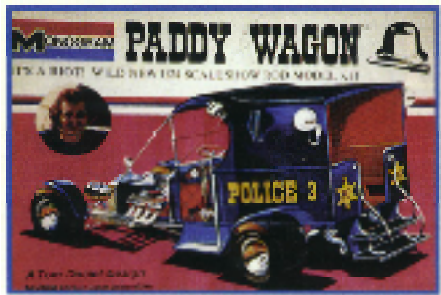
If you're an adult, currently buying the new Johnny Lightning Wacky Winners cars, you're probably a long-time Tom Daniel fan with warm memories of his work in the Sixties and Seventies. And if you're a youngster buying Wacky Winners, you're on your way to becoming one.

Daniel, simply out, is legendary in the world of car design and the creator of 75 of the wildest Monogram model kits collectors have ever seen—kits with names like Trantula, Beer Wagon, Rommel's Rod, Paddy Wagon, Bad Medicine,

Tom Daniel (inset) designed some of history's hottest model kits and inspired several valuable hot wheel diecasts. His first Monogram kits, the sensational Red Baron show rod, sold over two million copies within a couple years of its 1968 release. His other wild visions included the Paddy Wagon and the T'rantula dragster (facing page).

The T'rantula is pictured in its original Monogram kit form, reborn as a Johnny Lightning diecast, and built up as a rare '60s store display.





and Tijuana Taxi. He also created models for Bburago and Testors.

Some of the incredibly popular Tom Daniel kits were replicated as Hot Wheels cars; today, mint, blisterpacked Daniel's Hot Wheels such as S'Cool Bus can sell for hundreds of dollars. Others are reappearing now in the Johnny Lightning Wacky Winners series from Playing Mantis. Revell-Monogram is now reissuing some of the best-loved Tom Daniel kits with their original box art, including the Red Baron with a special collector tin. And at least one kit, the Red Baron—a T-bucket hot rod whose roof was a chrome helmet bearing a German Iron Cross—was re-created by a custom car builder as a full-size, real-life, get-in-and-drive-it hot rod.

Tom Daniel grew in a suburb of Los Angeles after World War II, fascinated by custom cars and hot rods, and having a talent for drawing them. Daniel was allowed to enter the prestigious Art Center in Los Angeles, a four-year college, when he was still a junior in high school.



"The hot rod scene had just started to take off. It blossomed in Los Angeles, near where I was," Daniel recalls in a video produced by Barefoot Ventures entitled *Tom Daniel, The Man Behind the Models*.

At the Art Center, Daniel says, he "spent the whole senior year drawing futuristic cars." When school was over he decided he wanted to go to work for General Motors. Daniel was hired by GM, where among other projects he designed the hood of a GMC truck—a design he would later incorporate into the hood of a hot rod school bus kit for Monogram called S'Cool Bus. "But generally at GM," Daniel remembers, "I was doing advanced design ten to fifteen years ahead."

While in art school Daniel had started drawing for *Rod & Custom*, doing features called "Styling Ideas" for customizing real cars or scale models. Eventually, he left General Motors and returned to the West Coast, where he would begin his work as consultant and designer for Monogram, working from a home studio for the Illinois-based model company. And he would continue sending stories and drawings to *Rod & Custom* and *Car Craft* until 1975.



Today, at 60, Daniel lives and works from his home in Las Vegas. Although some people think Beer Wagon was Daniel's first kit for Monogram, he recalls it being Red Baron. The 1/24-scale kit, Daniel says, sold "a couple of million copies in a short time" and then was reissued as a 1/12-scale kit. It was one of many, many kit projects on which Daniel was "free to roam" with design. Monogram, he says, would suggest ideas for model kits, and "I just ran with them."

During the nine years Daniel was a consultant to Monogram he kept up a furious pace, designing about one kit a month. "In 1969 or 1970 Mattel bought out Monogram," he says. Of the highly collectible Seventies Hot Wheels cars issued by Mattel based on Daniel's kits, Daniel says: "I had nothing to do or say about it, and nothing to do with the design of the Hot Wheels." Nor did he have any financial stake in their runaway popularity.



Although Daniel will say little else about Mattel, that is not the case regarding his positive relationship with Playing Mantis, the company that has already produced 10 of Daniel's most famous fantasy cars as Wacky Winners, and will deliver 10 more this year. Asked if he might have done anything differently in his career, Daniel says: "For sure. I neglected the business side of the equation, meaning the dollars generated for many companies far out-stripped any return received. This is one reason why I'm so impressed with Playing Mantis, because they never hesitated in wanting to pay me royalties for my designs. Satisfaction is neat, but it doesn't keep food on the table, so to speak"



The Daniel designs produced as Wacky Winners are Tijuana Taxi, Cherry Bomb, Bad Medicine (a dragster driven by a skeleton), T'rantula (which in its original Monogram kit form came with a plastic spider), Badman (a Chevy dragster with "Adios Mother" emblazoned on its

trunk), Draggin' Dragon, Garbage Truck (a hot rod garbage truck, complete with surfboards), Trouble Maker, Bad News, and Root Beer Wagon (a more child-friendly incarnation of the old Beer Wagon kit).

"It is a pleasure to be working with one of the most creative and innovative car designers of all time," says Thomas E. Lowe, president of Playing Mantis. "These cars are one-of-a-kind cars that children seven to seventy will like." Among the forthcoming Wacky Winners will be Desert Fox (based on the Rommel's Rod kit), Triple T, Rat Vega, Smug Bug (an injected VW Beetle), Baja Bandito, and TD Ride—inspired by the Monogram California Street "Vette kit, Daniel's own customized "Vette.

What does the future hold?

Daniel says he's excited about the prospect of creating some new designs for Johnny Lightning cars, as well as some new street rod models with Revell-Monogram. He also wants to do a line of fine art prints of cars, planes, trains, landscapes, and the like. He's been working in that direction for some time now, doing images of classic and custom cars reproduced as note cards.

In addition to everything else he's done, Daniel tells me he did a series of drag racing paintings in 1991, "on my old bud Gary Gabelich, who you'll no doubt recall had the World Land Speed record set at Bonneville—622.407 mph—back in 1970. I was executive vice president of Rocketman, Inc., for ten years, with primary responsibility for designing the 800-plus mph car we were close to having funded at the time of Gary's untimely death in 1984."



Despite the meteoric popularity of his kits in the Seventies, Daniel reaped few benefits from the millions of kits sold—and none from the Tom Daniel-inspired Hot Wheels diecasts. In fact, he endured a period of obscurity before seeing interest in his designs undergo a powerful renaissance.

Now he's back amid a swirl of enthusiasm for this work, thanks in part to people like Phil Davis, who created the video *Tom Daniel, The Man Behind the Models*. Davis, built the Monogram kits in his youth, then went on to be a collector, and carried his enthusiasm into his adulthood. Resurgent interest in hot-rodding and growth in the automobilia hobby have also played their parts.

"This has been a real boon to me!" says Tom Daniel. "There was a thirteen-year period there where about the only work I could get was construction work. By I always thought about those kits, with their multimillion unit sales. All those people couldn't have dropped out of the hobby. It turns out they hadn't. And they started asking, Hey, where the heck is Tom Daniel?"

Well, he's back, and in excellent form. Tom Daniel still draws and designs pretty much all day, seven days a week—and you can be sure some wild concepts are coming off the drawing board. "I'll be doing it till the day I'm outta here," he says.

Photos courtesy of Phil Davis/Barefoot Ventures, Revell-Monogram and Playing Mantis.

UPDATE:
An incredible array of Tom's Daniel's artwork and other TD information is available for sale on the internet at:
www.tomdaniel.com

From the Exclusive MOBILIA interview...

**TOM DANIEL--
IN HIS OWN WORDS**

On the Red Baron:

"It's one of the all-time best-selling kits, not just of mine, buy anyones's. It sold over two million copies within two years of its first issue back in 1968."

On his preference for truck-based hot rods:

"I had always liked trucks and trains and planes, anything mechanical and kind of commercial. When I started with Chuck Jordan [VP of styling at GM's truck division] that got me even more involved in truck design. Hot rods I'd always loved."

On design:

"I design all the pieces the old-fashioned way, all by hand—I can do it faster than the CAD [computer-aided design] guy. I've been able to do both the styling drawings and the detail drawings. That's one of the things Monogram liked a lot; it turned out a piece would be too difficult or expensive to make, they's give the drawings back to me and I could make a little change without compromising the overall design."

Tom Daniel's fortunes are soaring again, thanks to his new Johnny Lightning Wacky Winners diecasts—including such classics as Bad Medicine and the Tijuana Taxi. He even created the art for the blister cards.





Tom Daniel on the Small Screen

Tom Daniel in the swingin' Seventies.

Among the impressionable youngsters affected by Tom's Daniel's Monogram kits was Phil Davis. Now, almost 30 years later, Davis has parlayed his love of those models into an extensive collection--a veritable

shrine to Tom Daniel. More important, Davis worked with Tom Daniel to make a videotape that fans will surely appreciate.

IN an exclusive personal interview, Daniel discusses his career in illustration and automotive design, his work with Rod & Custom, the the Monogram and Mattel Hot Wheels years, and his current design projects. The video features rare collector models, built-ups, box art, and a comprehensive list of all Tom's designs. Viewers can discover the inspiration of the Red Baron-- and hear the the real story of who actually the Munsters' Koach and Dragula show cars.

It's a charming portrayal of Tom Daniel--a low-key guy whose impact on the car-crazed youth of the Seventies was enormous. **UPDATE TEXT:** The video is \$25.00 (with free shipping) from the "TD STORE" on Tom's new web site: www.tomdaniel.com



Among the millions of kids who bought Tom Daniel's models 20-some years ago was collector-turned videographer Phil Davis, who has just released a terrific documentary on Daniel's work. Above is an illustration Tom made to enliven Phil's stationary!