

# Secret Project Becomes Legend

BY BROOKS BRIERLEY

FEW PROTOTYPES HAVE HAD SO obvious an influence on automotive styling as John DeLorean's 1964 proposal of an eye-catching Pontiac roadster. The concept foretells both Pontiac Firebird and Chevrolet Corvette styling.

The Banshee's understated, beautifully proportioned look requires spelling Classic with a capital C. Sitting on a 90-inch wheelbase, the Banshee is four inches shorter than an MG TD. The lines and textures in the grille, the shapely wheel openings in the fiberglass body, and the frameless top of the windshield all leave a lasting impression. Yet this design took several years to become mainstream thinking at General Motors; Pontiac's earliest production use of it was louvered taillights in the GTO.

Today the 42-year-old Banshee seems almost contemporary, and could pass for the latest retro design. It feels like a production car; the plain black dash—with chrome-edged circular gauges and a rectangular radio borrowed from the Tempest—is well finished and user-friendly. A walnut-rimmed steering wheel offers a surprisingly subtle contrast to the black surfaces and sparse chrome hardware. The wheel's two thick aluminum spokes are tapered like airplane wings (drilled with various-sized holes for added effect), and there is a big red emblem in the center. The two leather buckets are comfortable for tall people. The seats do not travel, but the pedals are adjustable.

The Banshee does not have working

headlights—the pods in the fender are empty. Another interesting feature is the rear deck, which opens up to release or swallow the top. However, using the key in the lock at the back of the car only opens the trunk lid section of the rear deck.

Collector Joe Bortz, the Banshee's owner, is particularly fond of the car. "It always starts right up," he says. When Bortz bought the Banshee, he wasn't sure if its high-performance engine was a hopped-up 1964 powerplant or an advanced 1965



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design. The exterior dimensions of Pontiac's V8 engine block were the same for several versions, from 326 cubic inches to 431 cubic inches. Bortz has not taken the engine apart to determine exactly which model this is, simply being delighted that it can "run like gangbusters." The quarter-mile takes just more than 12 seconds.

Our drive in the Banshee was more leisurely. We were in the suburbs, it had been raining, and looked ready to do so again. To experience driving with the top down, we decided on a short route

with little traffic, but right as we began to enjoy how smoothly the four-speed manual transmission shifts, we gave in to the temptation to run with the cars entering a nearby expressway.

Driving such a car in threatening weather underscores one of the drawbacks of older cars—seals in windows and doors can dry out, and in a downpour it can be hard to know exactly where the vulnerable spots are. Similarly, water splashing and breaking through the undercoating of such a valuable car can also be a problem.

After the Banshee project was canceled, this eight-cylinder roadster and a companion six-cylinder coupe avoided the crusher by being hidden in shipping crates. Years later the cars were sold to their designers (with a rumor GMAC financed the sales). Bill Collins, the Banshee's chief engineer (later of Vixen motor home fame), bought the roadster and took it home. In 1990 Collins sold it to Bortz. In researching the car's history, Bortz had several telephone conversations with DeLorean.

DeLorean recounted the Banshee's history, beginning as a concept in 1964 when he was Pontiac's general manager. GM management saw the idea as competition for the Corvette and rejected it. Determined, DeLorean went ahead and had the Banshee built in secret, then sought to have it accepted as a Mustang competitor. Again approval for production was denied. Yet neither veto could stop the Banshee's stunning styling cues from becoming the stuff of automotive legend. ■

## MARKET

Bonhams  
Monte Carlo, Monaco  
May 20

1959 Fiat 500 Jolly beach car  
479-cc two-cylinder; four-speed. Pink with natural wicker interior. Said to be a genuine beach car rather than a fake chop job. Last restored in 2005 to a decent overall level. Paint is thick but evenly so, and very nice. Some chrome poor. The basket wickerwork seating appears to be unused.



Sold at \$48,386

Nearly 3 million copies of the little Fiat 500 were sold during its 18-year production run.

Available in a number of body styles from sedate to sporting, it is the Ghia-designed Jolly that transformed the car into a status symbol. Long the toy car of choice for Riviera dwellers and luxury hotel guests, no Bonhams Monaco sale would be complete without one. Two years ago you could buy them all day for around \$20,000. Though this price is high—firmly 10 grand over estimate—it's no shocker at this venue.

—KEITH MARTIN