

Shakin' Street

Chris Singer

1970

"Shakin' Street, it's got that beat; Shakin' Street, where all the kids meet; Shakin' Street, it's got that sound; Shakin' Street, you gotta get down."

—by MC 5

VAN NUYS, Cal.—A pack of chopped Hogs growls down the boulevard headed toward a bar for a couple of bottles of Coors beer.

Across the street, the girl in the raised, candy red Comet speed shifts away from the stoplight.

Two more girls—one with puffed platinum hair, the other with teased and dyed jet-black hair—cruise out, looking for guys.

A pair of couples lounge lazily in the carpeted and walnut-paneled confines of their customized Chevrolet van. It has black naugahyde upholstered walls and a stained glass partition between them and the driver's seat.

The sounds of Jimi Hendrix blare through the van's stereo speakers, blending with the roar of modified motors and the formula rock of radio station KDAY.

A block away from where the van is parked, another Chevy, this one a '55 two-door, is parked. The owner has the one-piece, tilting fiberglass front end up, exhibiting his chromed and painted motor.

This is Van Nuys Boulevard on a Wednesday night-Club Night.

Van Nuys is the place to cruise in the Los Angeles area. They get out on those bizarre eight-lane freeways and drive north to suburban Van Nuys to cruise a two-mile stretch of the community's main street.

Wednesday night is for car clubs—the Associated Vans, a customized vans club, the Nomadic Club, for owners of '55 to '57 Chevrolet Nomad wagons, the Thunderbird Club, for owners of the classic '55 through '57 'Birds, Camaro Club, etc.

Bill Krause remembers one night on Van Nuys when traffic was so heavy it took you an hour to fight through the bumper-to-bumper traffic and get to Bob's Drive-In. Kids were out of their cars that night, he recalls, partying down right out in the middle of the street.

Bill and Steve Blum hanging out in front of the fried chicken restaurant, taking it all in. "The Hawk" joins them. He's Steve's brother, Andrew.

The trio are all officers in the farthest out club of them all, the Street Racers of Los Angeles County, Inc.

Steve, who is 23, wears a beard and moderately long hair. He is the vice-president of the Street Racers. He is white.

William Andrew Robinson III, "Big Willie," is the 27-year-old president and founder of the club. The son of a New Orleans auto body repairman, Big Willie was one of the first blacks admitted to Louisiana State University.

After a year in premed there, he dropped out when his mother moved to Los Angeles. Standing six feet, six inches tall and weighing 265 pounds, Big Willie works at a gymnasium and runs his club.

They call themselves "A New Breed of Brotherhood."

"We're trying to build our own dragstrip to get the cars off the street," Steve explains.

"And promote brotherhood," he adds.

“What that means is,” Bill, the club’s 23-year-old communications officer says, “instead of standing on the corner, black people here, white people there -just one corner, with everybody on it.”

In Bill’s Z-28 Camaro he has a police radio: It is his job to monitor police calls and warn the street racers of a bust.

Steve says they have run races at night on blocked-off city streets that have attracted 5,000 racers and spectators.

Bill could face a maximum sentence of five years in jail and/or a \$10,000 fine if caught as a second party relaying police messages. That’s a felony in California.

Steve claims 71,000 persons have enrolled in the club, only 30,000 of them from California.

“It’s not advertised, you know,” he says of the organization.

“Basically, if somebody from Detroit comes out here and hears about us, they usually try to find us.”

They plan on organizing nationally.

“We’ve got to get a platform going to work on here and then we can send people out to other parts of the country,” Steve says.

The Hawk, who is 20 and the club treasurer, and Steve explain that the club includes more than 1,000 bikers, blacks, whites, Chicanos, college students, working class youth; women, radicals and conservatives. “We’ve got some Panthers and some members of the Ku Klux Klan,” Steve says.

They wear American flags on their jackets.

Big Willie told a national magazine: “Actually, the Street Racers are a fine example of integration and the fact that membership includes teenagers, Muslims, cycle gangs, college students, hippies, the wealthy and the poor in a melting pot of American society, should convince skeptics of our legitimate value.

“The American flag is even reproduced on our jackets to display sincere patriotism.”

The Street Racers served as bodyguards for a black Los Angeles councilman who ran against Mayor Sam Yorty in that city’s last mayoral election.

Bill wears a “Tunney” button on his uniform jacket.

With the increased number of high-performance options offered by Detroit, and the increased professionalism in organized drag-racing; street racing has been on the upswing around the country. The Street Racers are not the only organized group.

One eastern group promoted a nationally-advertised street race, won by a Firebird from the Motor City, that had \$500 up for Top. Eliminator.

The Street Racers promote midnight to 7 a.m. races at Orange County International Raceway in Riverside, north of Los Angeles. They offer \$150 in prize money.

Some professional street racers are reputed to gross \$15,000 a year on bets.

The organizational base is there; the Street Racers seek to use it.

A hundred members served as extras in the yet-to-be-released movie, “Hall of Mirrors.” Now the Street Racers want to produce their own film on street-racing

The police know of the Street Racers. Plainclothesmen, some in high-performance cars, are everywhere they are.

They get along passably with the Los Angeles Police Department, but, like everyone else, fear the dangerous California Highway Patrol—the state police who approach cars with drawn guns and will ticket drivers for going two miles an hour over the speed limit.

And the Street Racers are unsure of the Low-Riders

The Low-Riders seem the logical conclusion of the rocknroll revival.

They build big sedans, radically lowered, and intended exclusively for cruising out. Street racing is not the Low-Riders’ thing.

Drugs are.

Steve says the Low-Riders carry pills—an upper or downer for every occasion—in their cars. They cruise out, long hair flowing in the breeze, in their low slung throwbacks to the ‘50s, popping pills.

The Low-Riders are new to the California street scene. They are yet a different group in the kaleidoscope of car-oriented youth—the bikers, the surfer-van drivers, the street racers, and the sports car types.

On Wednesday night, on Van Nuys Boulevard, they’re all there.

It is a rolling custom car show—shakin' street.

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