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AUGUST 25, 1986

\$1.00

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## Red Tape Countach

*A sweet prize turns sour*

# Red Tape Countach

When Tim Meseke won his fantasy car, it almost ruined him

By Tom Lankard

*"There are two things you have when you're growing up, dreams and fantasies. The 911 is the dream; the Countach is the fantasy."*—Tim Meseke, philosopher, 1986

**T**im Meseke didn't become a philosopher through long hours of study behind ivy-covered walls. And he didn't achieve that exalted status through a pilgrimage to a bearded guru on the top of some Asian mountain, either.

No, Tim Meseke became a philosopher after being handed his fantasy in November 1985 and then having it start turning into a nightmare less than a month later.

The Meseke family lives in a three-bedroom house on a generally quiet, two-lane, yes, tree-lined street in Kansas City, Kan. Tim and Laurie were Washington High School sweethearts, celebrating this summer their eighth wedding anniversary and the 10th of their first date. They bought the house, their first, in 1983.

The Meseke kids have their own rooms, although the youngest, eight month old Megan Elizabeth, can't really appreciate hers yet; Derek Michael, who'll be three this summer, is learning to, no doubt.

A chain link fence surrounds the front yard, but is set back a couple of yards from the sidewalk to leave room for a parked car—the street is a "No Parking" feeder to a feeder to nearby I-35. With ribs smoking on the barbecue by the garage door, the scene is classic Midwest suburbia.

Tim opens the garage door. Hunkered inside is a low, red car with an exotic, Italian-looking back end. A starter motor grinds, then whines briefly as the engine catches. The mechanical cacophony of cam chains, valves and six dual throat Webers singing background to the purr of a V12 exhaust make it known immediately this is no knocked-off replicar.

Kids tossing a baseball stop and stare. The car eases out of the garage shadows into the sunlight. Tim parks it, shuts it down, raises the door and climbs out. Noticing the kids, he tells them it's OK to come over and look. Cars slow as they drive by while the occupants rubberneck.

Tim Meseke's fantasy has that effect on people. So far, he says, there've been two accidents on the street as a direct result of it just being parked in the driveway.

And that's not the only problem it's caused in the past eight months.

In 1981, Tim saw his first Lamborghini Countach in *Cannonball Run*. Tim says he fell in love with the car at first sight. And, he adds just to make sure you understand, "it didn't have anything to do with Adrienne Barbeau, I can tell you that."

Later that year, Tim and Laurie were in Southern California for the wedding of a high school buddy. Like so many visiting that part of the country, they scheduled a trip to Disneyland with friends.

Driving down California's Route 1 through the wall-to-wall beach communities

south of LA on the way to their date with Fantasyland, Tim glanced to his left. There, in all their glory, sat not one but two, count 'em, two Countaches.

The sight was, he says, "inconceivable to a Kansas boy." They parked their Chevy Luv, walked onto the lot and gently touched The Car for the first time.

One of the cars in the two rolls of pictures Tim took during the two and one half hours they were late to their Disneyland date is a red, flared-fendered, targa-topped Countach "SS" with a slight depression in the right side of the roof.

The car lot in the background is packed with exotica—Jaguars, BMWs, Ferraris, Mercedes' and a Rolls or two. The name of the dealership doesn't show in any of the photos, and Tim doesn't recall noticing it. He was to learn later it was the Newport Beach shop of one Al Mardikian, the founder of Trend Imports, one of the first gray market conversion shops and dealerships in the country—the same Al Mardikian convicted in 1985 for lying to the government about his gray market conversions and sent to the slammer.

When *Cannonball Run II* came out in '84, Tim saw it on the big screen twice. When it made the move to late night TV, he stayed up, too, but just to catch the first 10min, he says, "with the cops chasing the 'ghini." And again, there's no love lost for the buxomy driver, "the bitch that kicked the car"—Catherine Bach, the duch-



Vic Huber photo

ess of Hazard, for those who missed this sequel.

Such were the vicarious joys of Tim Meseke's life for the first four years of his fantasy. Then came the day in July 1985 when he saw his fantasy beckoning to him from the window of an Alpine car stereo outlet in Overland Park, a well-to-do 'burb of KC, Kan.

"Win This Lamborghini," the sign said. "See Details Inside."

Within minutes, Tim was back in his car with a \$65 dollar set of door speakers and an entry blank. He says he didn't need the speakers, "but I wanted to enter the contest," and he couldn't afford to spend more than \$100.

The contest? You guessed it: In 25 words or less, answer the question, What does the Alpine Touch mean to me?

By the time he got home, Tim had worked out his hook—food. As a sideline to his regular job as a forklift driver in the KC Coca Cola bottling plant, he runs Meseke's Music, a rent-a-dj business for parties, wedding receptions and the like. Nothing terribly original in that, but he advertises the business as "sound caterers" and thought it'd be worth a shot.

His 24-word answer? "Alpine—The Sound Caterer. Brings a menu of sound to my car, delivering 'crisp' bass, 'tangy' midrange and 'sweet' highs. Savor 'The Alpine Touch!'"

Four months later, in early November, came a message on his phone answering machine that sounded to Tim like somebody looking to do business with Meseke's Music. When he returned the call the next day, he found himself talking with the Alpine dealer he'd bought the speakers from and whose entry form he'd used.

"It's my pleasure to congratulate you for winning the ultimate car stereo from Alpine," were the first words Tim recalls hearing. That was second prize, but the man kept talking.

"You've also won the mobile security system from Alpine to protect it"—things were looking up; that made it first prize—"and you've also won a cellular telephone

to tell all your friends about it."

It'd been awhile since Tim had read over the prize list, so the enormity of that last phrase didn't hit him immediately.

"I was actually let down, yeah, in a greedy kind of way," he says. "I'd got so close, but didn't win the car."

"Oh, by the way," the voice on the telephone continued, "they've also taken care of the installation. They've installed it in the Alpine Lamborghini; you've won the car."

Tim says he should have known when the man mentioned the cellular telephone, because that only came with the car, with the Grand Prize. Still, out of an abundance of caution, he had his doubts. After all, how often do fantasies come to life?

"That told me," Tim says. "That locked it in."

On Nov 21, 1985, Tim Meseke at last started living his fantasy. But the day's

check the car's registration, and Tim's fantasy collected its first two tickets: The car still had California tags, and Tim hadn't even started looking for insurance yet.

Jerked back to the flat Kansas earth by the cop's reintroduction to reality, but figuring the worst was over, Tim set about conforming his Countach—nice sound, that "his"—to Kansas motor vehicle laws.

The first stop was Tim's credit union, where he took out a \$3500 loan to pay Kansas personal property and sales tax on the car. The second stop was the Kansas Highway Patrol to have the car's ID numbers checked against the California papers Tim had to exchange for Kansas tag and title.

When a gray market car is converted to meet federal emission and vehicle safety laws, a certification plate is riveted to the driver's door post. The plate states, among other things, when the car was manufac-

before Christmas to tell him the car would have to be inspected for conformance to US specs. Putting a real damper on the Meseke's holiday spirits, the agent also casually suggested Tim not put any more money into the car because it might have to be confiscated.

But in the meantime, there's Christmas, and all the governmental red tape be damned, the Meseke's are going to have theirs. And as it turns out, so is a young kid who lives about 15 miles outside KC, who had seen pictures of Tim and the Countach in the newspaper, and who gave his mom two Christmas lists, one labeled "Things I can have" and the other "Things I can't have." At the top of that second list was a ride in Tim's car.

The mom wrote Tim, and for that kid, now there really is a Santa Claus.

In mid-January, the federales show up at



*You won the sound system, the phone...*



*A simple life: a couple of steaks...*



*...and an Italian six-pack*

events didn't come off smoothly, and the faint at heart might say that was an omen.

Believe it or not, the first obstacle Tim faced was getting time off from his job. He didn't have any vacation time on the books, and his supervisors weren't about ready to hand him free time to go pick up a fancy foreign sports car he'd won in some contest.

He couldn't just take the time off without pay, either. The plant docks employees who miss too many days, and Tim was up against his limit; to cut a full day would earn him 10 points and cost him five days off without pay. But to miss only part of the day would leave him a five point cushion.

No problem. Tim was at work at eight and by nine eating breakfast with the Alpine people at the Marriott in Overland Park.

There were some minor problems with the actual delivery of the car, too—somebody'd left the interior lights on when the car was unloaded at the Alpine dealer the night before, and the battery was almost dead, something the 19deg-temperature that day didn't help—but finally, Tim Meseke got to drive his Countach, his fantasy.

"I killed it twice," he says, a little embarrassed. One of the times, a cop stopped to check things out and ended up giving him a jump start. The Alpine PR guys had advanced the police on the event, so "he was real nice about it," Tim says.

The next day, Tim gave his high school auto shop teacher a ride—and got docked his five days without pay, too. Adding insult to injury, another cop stopped him to

tured and contains the car's vehicle identification number.

The plate on Tim's Countach says the car was manufactured "1/78" by Trend Imports—yep; from all indications, Tim Meseke won the same car he'd reverently caressed on a car lot in Southern California some four years earlier—and lists the VIN as 11200134. But the California title says it's a '74, that it was first registered in '79 and that its VIN is 1120134.

The first two discrepancies didn't really bother the KHP officer, but the last one stopped him cold. If the numbers don't match, he can't sign off, and the whole thing gets bucked to his supervisor.

Two days later, with the fantasy's glow starting to fade a bit, the supervisor drops by. And things look up. All the other plates on the car—the ones the factory put on—match the California title VIN: one zero.

The supervisor decides the converter just made a typographical error and signs off on the Kansas title and registration application. Still, he says, he has to flag the application for review in Topeka because of the mismatch and because the car's missing the required dash-mounted VIN plate.

But Tim's fantasy's got Kansas tags, and the KHP man says the Topeka review would be routine, so at last all's right.

Well, not quite. The KHP's flag kicked the registration out of the Kansas DMV computer, and US Customs was notified a gray market car had just arrived on the KC scene. The resident agent called Tim just

Meseke's house. The DOT guy asked about the steering wheel lock (the car had it), the seatbelt buzzer (it didn't) and the fuel system safety valve (it didn't). The EPA man looked at the engine and saw the air injection pump wasn't hooked up and that there was no evaporative control system.

"They took a few notes," Tim says, "but wouldn't give me any answers right there at all." They said they had to send a report on the car to Washington, and ever since, he says, they will only say they're "waiting to hear from Washington."

And where does that leave Tim Meseke and his Countach? Customs says it's not really interested in "pursuing" the car, he says, but that it's illegal and has to be fixed; EPA says he should apply for a mitigation waiver; and DOT told him "to just let it blow over."

Ah ha, you're thinking, but where's Alpine in all this? Tim says they're right in there pitching. To help with the cash flow, Alpine arranged for Tim to do weekend promo work with its midwestern dealers. About straightening out the car, he says, Haggott promised if Tim can find out what needs to be done to fix it, Alpine will pick up the tab.

As far as Tim's concerned, Alpine's the white knight in all this. Because of them, he's got his fantasy, and to hear Laurie and him talk about the times they've had with the car, that's enough for him.

"If we want to go out and inflate our ego," Laurie says, "we take a trip to Coun-

try Club Plaza, a shopping center in Mission Hills, where KC millionaires live and play.

"It's so fun, watching people watch you," she says with a mischievous smile. "You can read people's lips, and they don't know it."

Tim says there's nothing quite like pulling up to some fancy restaurant in Overland Park—"where all the BMWs and Porsches live"—and having the valet park your car right in front and then sitting inside and watching the crowd it draws. The final touch, he says, is when he and Laurie leave and the crowds connect these two, in their denims and cotton dress, with The Car.

But unfortunately, the story doesn't end there. As the saying goes, the only sure bets in life are death and taxes, and the latter will likely be the death of the fantasy.

Prizes, like Tim's Countach, are taxed as income. To figure the tax due, Tim took the car to a couple of exotic car dealers in KC and asked them what they'd give for the car. Based on that appraisal, the car added over \$10,000 to the Meseke's federal tax bill and about \$1100 to their state dues.

Again, they figured, no problem. Get a loan with the Countach as security; it's worth several times that amount. The first bank they checked with agreed, just bring in the title and evidence of insurance.

Whoops.

Back in November, Tim had simply added the Countach to his existing policy. But when the company saw all the publicity

about the "\$100,000" sports car and the newspaper article with his home address, it got cold feet. Result: insurance canceled.

Shopping around, Tim found a number of KC insurance agents who would write 30-day binders while their company's home office underwriters figured out a Lamborghini Countach wasn't a kit car, at which point the binders were summarily unbound and Tim's money gratefully refunded.

Tim says he even got a quote from Lloyd's of London. The tag and terms? Annual premium of \$2500-3000 for comprehensive only, no collision or liability, which meant no driving, only trailering to and from promo events and shows.

After a couple of months of shopping, Laurie says, "every underwriter knew the car" and wouldn't even do the binders.

Finally, the week before tax deadline, Tim found an Overland Park State Farm agent. In one day, the guy put together and got home office OK on a full coverage package. The only catch was, the Meseke's had to turn all their insurance business over to the guy, the house and the other two cars, an '85 Dodge panel and an '84 Dodge 600ES. Still, the premium for the entire package came in under Lloyd's quote.

With the insurance policy in hand, Tim started making the rounds of the banks again. By this time, April 15 has come and gone, and the penalties and interest are starting to accrue on the taxes due. After hitting "11 or 12" banks, the new problem

—which nobody bothered to tell him before—is his cash flow.

"Basically, I shouldn't own this car," Tim says they're trying to tell him, "not with my income." The weekend Alpine promo deals are bringing in just enough to service the penalties and interest on the taxes, but they stop in the Fall, when the weather starts to turn in the Midwest.

Tim is now saying the car "is probably going to get sold in September. We even tried for a second mortgage, but nobody wants to loan us the money.

"Don't worry," he adds. "I'm going to be playing with it all summer."

And when he settles in behind the wheel and twists the key, it's easy to see he means just that. The tension and frustration he's been re-living for the past two or three hours over his dining room table drop away, to be replaced with, yes, almost a boyish grin. It's as if the rumbling, barely muffled clattering washing over him from the engine nestled behind his right shoulder has somehow rinsed all the "bad" away.

If you ask a shrink about fantasies, you'll probably be told people are better off not trying to live them, that they're supposed to be kept inside, as occasional escapes, or to entertain and amuse; at worst to test and define reality.

There may be some truth in that, and Tim Meseke may someday accept it. But for the moment, he's living his fantasy and loving every minute of it—almost. **AW**



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