



The Bond Bug

How a wedge-shaped orange three-wheeler became a 1970s cult classic – and an anti-gravity space craft

One can hardly blame Tom Karen for finding it hard to choose a favourite out of all his designs. After all, he is the creative genius behind a string of cult classics – from icons of 1970s childhood, the Marble Run and Raleigh Chopper, to the smash hit 1960s Bush TR130 radio and the sleek Reliant Scimitar GTE. It's difficult to digest the legacy of this one, extraordinary man.

But it had to be the Bond Bug, after all.

Tom had always wanted to design a sporty, fun three-wheeler, and he got his chance when Reliant took over the defunct Bond Car Company: Tom pitched the idea of his tangerine, ergonomic, wedge-shaped Bug and in 1970 moved it swiftly into production. He describes it as 'one of the most creative things I have done'.

He designed the car with a hinged lift-up door (for ease of escape) and flat glass windscreen with single wiper for economy of fabrication. The fibreglass body

panels were designed without undercuts, allowing single piece moulds – a first for Bond. An aeronautic NACA air intake was incorporated, adding to its contemporary appearance.

Rather as Henry Ford had it, a customer could have the Bug in any colour... provided it was orange ('another simplification, so it became a kind of orange Ferrari for the 16-year-olds who could drive it', Tom has said. It was registered and taxed as a motorbike.)

The badging was designed using decals, adding to its 'trendy' look. The interior, with its reclining seats, resembled a racing car but with the driver safely enclosed in a roll-cage – its effectiveness demonstrated by an over-enthusiastic journalist rolling one over at the Woburn Abbey press launch, mercifully without damage to himself or the Bug.

It may not have been a commercial success, but the Bug captured the spirit of the times. Low production numbers kept



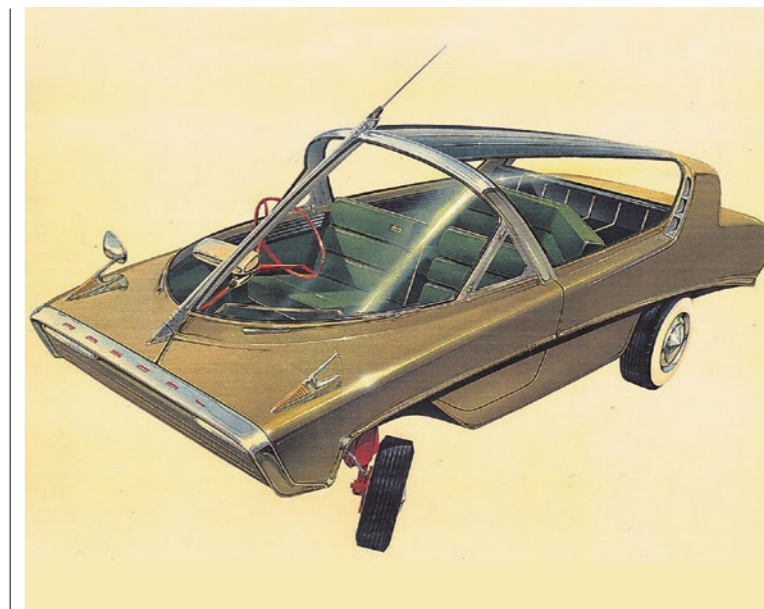
It became a kind of orange Ferrari for the 16-year-olds who could drive it

it expensive, but it showed that personal transport could be efficient and fun. Of the 2,268 made, around 200 are kept running by their devoted owners, with another 900 or so still in existence off the road. *Star Wars* fans will note that Luke Skywalker's space-cruising Landspeeder was in fact a Bug with an extended body – it appears to fly by, having angled mirrors concealing its wheels.

Tom grew up in Brno, in the Czech Republic, but his family left as the Nazis advanced. He worked first in the aircraft industry, then joined Ford design studio and came to prominence when his 'Rascal'

concept car won a competition in 1958. He was appointed managing director of Ogle Design following the untimely death of David Ogle in a car crash, running the firm from 1962 until his retirement in 1999. Under Tom's leadership it expanded, and he designed a heady range of products from cars to commercial vehicles, bikes, radios, toys, crash-test dummies and even a couple of 'Popemobiles'.

Now in his nineties, Tom is rather frail and in a wheelchair, but visiting his house remains a joy, each surface covered by objects conjured from discarded odds and ends. Stepping through the door



Left: The cheerfully distinctive orange Bug with its lift-up door and flat glass windscreen. Above: Designer Tom Karen's competition-winning 'Rascal' concept car of 1958. Right: The Bug's small scale, flat bottom and emphasis on simplicity prompted jokes – in this vintage cartoon, Russell Brockbank depicts 'an amusing way to park a Bug'. Below: Tom Karen, seated, with his long-time friend Brent Smith, who organised an exhibition of Tom's work in Letchworth earlier this year



– as one visitor put it – is like entering a 'workshop of creativity, guaranteed to bring happiness'.

How was one man so prolific? He didn't spend his time watching TV; he was never without a sketchbook.

He is not interested in discussing the past: the future still excites his imagination. Tom continues to promote his concept of a 'Floating City', an answer to providing housing, hospitals and other essential buildings without disrupting the cities they serve.

He loves architecture but regularly berates me over how vehicle production has advanced over the last 50 years, whereas domestic

building remains in the Victorian age. His concept for an all-electric 'Buzz' car has been described as a prototype for future travel.

Tom's contribution to design was recognised with an OBE in 2019, but the hundreds of young people that he has encouraged and inspired are his true legacy. My abiding memory will be of him surrounded by children enjoying creating things out of scrap material.

Brent Smith

Tom's autobiography, Toymaker: My Journey from War to Wonder, is out now. For more on his life and work see tomkarendesigner.co.uk