

A GALAXIE FAR, FAR AWAY

> BY JAY LENO
> PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN LAMM



JAY IS RESTORING A 1966 FORD GALAXIE 7 LITRE—JUST LIKE THE CAR HIS DAD ONCE OWNED.

Most of us have a special affinity for the cars our parents owned when we were growing up. I was brought home from the hospital in a '49 Plymouth sedan. At age 7, I was with my dad when we went to Crabtree Motors in New Rochelle, N.Y., and bought a black and white Plymouth Belvedere—the one with the big fins.

In 1966 we walked into the dealership to buy another car—a Ford Galaxie. By this time, I was 16 and could drive. Usually my dad would just buy whatever they had on the showroom floor.

But there were no full-size Galaxies. There were only Fairlanes and Falcons. "I don't want a little car," my father said. "I want a full-size car." So the salesman asked if we wanted to order a car. And I piped up, "Can I pick the engine? I want to pick the engine." So my mother said,

"Oh, let the boy pick the engine. What difference does it make?"

So my dad agreed.

I even remember the salesman's name. It was Tom Lawrence. I pulled him aside and said, "Tom, here's what we need: We want the full-size Galaxie with the 7 Litre package." In 1966, for just one year, the 7 Litre was a separate model. It was the top-of-the-line Galaxie, and it came standard with a 428-cubic-inch V8.

I couldn't convince my dad to get the four-speed manual, so we ordered our

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7 Litre with the heavy-duty Cruise-o-Matic. I remember saying to the salesman, "Can we get the muffler delete, and just go with the straight glasspacks?"

"Are you sure you want that?"

"Yup," I told him. "That's what we want."

Four weeks went by, and my whole family headed down to pick up the Galaxie. It was maroon, and, of course, it wore those 7 Litre hubcaps that looked like imitation custom wheels. They were wrapped with those skinny little whitewalls too. It was a two-door pillarless coupe with a black interior—a beautiful car.

I'll never forget what happened next. My father got in the car—we were back in the service area—and he turned the key. The car let out a thunderous *rrrraaaaggggrrrrrraaaahhhh*. And my father said, "There's a hole in the muffler. It's a brand-new car, and there's a hole in the muffler!" The salesman explained, "No, Mr. Leno. That's the way it sounds."

"Whaddya mean that's the way it sounds?" my dad said. "What new car sounds like that?" The salesman made it clear that we had checked muffler delete on the order, which specified glasspacks. My father looked at the order sheet, then looked at me. "What did you make me buy here?"

Frustrated, he said, "Oh fahrhis-sakes, let's get out of here." He put it in drive and just nailed it. The car went *eeeeerrrrrrrrreeeeeerrrkkk!* spinning the tires on the cement floor. My father said, "I bought a rocket ship; you made me buy a rocket ship!" He was yelling about "the stupid car" all the way home.

A couple of months went by, and I was in my parents' bedroom looking for something. I opened my father's top dresser drawer, and I saw a ticket.



Jay bought this 1966 Ford Galaxie 7 Litre in Canada a year ago; it's the same model his dad once owned. It's now under restoration at Jay's garage and will be sprayed the very same Vintage Burgundy as his father's 7 Litre.

He got a ticket for going 110 mph. So I knew he really enjoyed the car.

Unfortunately, like most cars of that time, it was brand new in '66, but it didn't look that way for long. By '68, rust bubbles were appearing on the top of the fenders. By 1973, the car was pretty much rusted out. But that didn't matter too much because I wrapped the Galaxie around a tree and broke it in half.

I always loved that 7 Litre. And I wanted to relive the experience. Last year, I finally found a 7 Litre in Canada, a four-speed car—the one I always wanted my dad to get. I contacted the guy, bought it and brought it home. Just going for a cruise down the highway, it makes me smile, remembering those days. And it still seems pretty quick.

We've stripped down the car and started the restoration process. As we began to take the car apart, we ripped up the carpet where the four-speed was, and there was a big hacked-out hole around the transmission. I thought maybe it wasn't a four-speed car after all. I checked the data plate and called my friend Vince Panicola, at the Galaxie 7 Litre website 7litre.org, who confirmed it was a real four-speed. In those days, most people

bought the automatics, so the cars came with the C6 floor pan. If a car was marked "four-speed," the line workers took a Sawzall or a torch and just cut a bigger hole so they could stick in the manual transmission. That just shows you the way they did things back in the day.

Speaking of which, after our family had bought that 7 Litre Galaxie, I started working at my local Ford dealership as the lot boy. Every day I'd go out with a rubber hammer and put on 50 or 60 sets of hubcaps. And every night I'd have to take them off, because kids would steal them. One day, I was carrying a big pile of hubcaps. As I came around the corner, I bumped into my boss and dropped all the hubcaps. He yelled and fired me on the spot. I was so upset I didn't even tell my parents. I pretended to go to work every day for two weeks. Then I wrote a letter to Henry Ford II. I told him about the Fords our family owned and mentioned that this was my first job. After 10 days, my boss, Ben Ristuccia, called me and said, "I don't know who you know in Detroit, but you can have your old job back." So you can see, I have a lot of history with Ford.

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