

CSX2021 at 50

— Frank Zizzo

CSX2021 was invoiced to Shelby American on October 1, 1962—when I was a car crazy high school sophomore with a 1953 Mercury that cost me fifty bucks. It was powered by a venerable flathead V8 which quickly acquired a pair of Stromberg 97s with bad needle valves that would periodically stick and flood the cylinders with 25¢ a gallon gasoline. It had a non-functioning hood scoop, until I got an axe and used it to chop a hole sort of near where the air intake should be. The 3-speed had a very un-cool column shifter, so I saved my money until I had enough to get a Fenton floor shift kit. I was happy to have my own car, but it was much heavier to push than my mom's Rambler. When I would sneak out of my bedroom window at night to go cruising, I had to push the Merc down the block before I could start it, so I wouldn't wake her up.

On November 30, 1962 there is a receipt from Shelby American for two Lucas 50-amp fuses (at 8¢ each) and two 25-amp fuses (11¢ each). It appears that the "Prince of Darkness" hovered over Cobras from the very beginning.

On December 3, 1962 CSX2021 was purchased by Dick Newhall, a Stanford Ph.D., for \$5,995.00 plus \$1.25 for rust inhibitor in the cooling system. DMV fees were \$16.00 for 1962 and \$91.00 for 1963. Stories abound about the earliest days of the car, told by Newhall, who passed away in the late 1960s/early 1970s. He remains a legend to his nephews. Prior to buying the car, Carroll Shelby took Newhall for a ride in the Cobra. Newhall had his young nephew in his lap and Shelby took off, full throttle, toward a nearby pier. He came to an abrupt stop within a few feet of the end of the pier, with nothing ahead except the Pacific Ocean. When Newhall got out of the car, his pants were wet; he blamed it on his nephew.

Newhall was an avid SCCA racer and lived in San Francisco. He had raced both an MG TC and an AC Bristol, and was soon racing the Cobra. However, the relationship was not a happy one. The car was



more than he wanted to handle, so he soon gave up and bought an open-wheel, single-seat Stanguellini to race. The Cobra became the tow car (the hitch receiver brackets are still welded to the chassis tubes). Newhall is said to have received a speeding ticket while driving the Cobra and towing the Stanguellini up the Grapevine at 85 mph. There are a ton of Newhall stories, wistfully related by his nephews. He married late in his life. Following the wedding ceremony, everyone threw rice at the newlyweds in their Cobra getaway car. Newhall could not bear the rice kernels littering the car's interior, so he and Pat stopped between the church and the reception hall to pick them out, one by one. They arrived at the reception three hours late, making a lasting impression on his new in-laws who had paid for the lavish affair.

The Newhalls had no children but a pack of nieces and nephews made up for it. They recall how much he loved the car and was neurotic about it. His wife Pat was from Massachusetts, and after he passed away she moved back home, taking the car with her. She sold it sometime in 1968.

Between 1968 to 1973, CSX2021's whereabouts or who owned it are not

known. However, in 1973 it was listed for sale in Westboro, Massachusetts. The individual selling it had it parked in a two-car garage next to his house next to a 427 Cobra without an engine or transmission. The price for either car was \$5,000. At that time it had a roll bar, a Weber induction system and Ferrari-style side vents cut into the fenders.

It was purchased by Ward and Richard Heinrich from Litchfield, Connecticut. In 1983, Ward moved to Texas and took 2021 with him. He drag raced the car occasionally and in 1984, he entered it in the Dallas Grand Prix vintage race. The car failed to finish. He put it up for sale in 1989, and it was purchased by a buyer who "promised to keep it forever." In the following ten days CSX2021 changed hands four times, ultimately being purchased by Mike Tangney and brought back to Northern California. He enjoyed the car until 1994 when I bought it from him.

My father raced Midgets after WWII until the late 50s. There were a lot of dirt tracks and a lot of people who had made it through the war came home eager for competition and looking for a different kind of



Some psychologists believe that children are imprinted before they are five years-old. Frank Zizzo, age 3, is living proof of that theory. This photo was taken in 1950. Some 45 years later he would be racing his own #68.

risk. My dad's car carried the number 68 and it was the first race car I ever rode in. I really don't remember it, because I was about 18 months-old. Family legend has it that my father put me on his lap and did a few hot laps (this in the days before roll bars and lawyers). He didn't have goggles for me and as a result, I was blind for a week from the dust. My mother never let him live that one down.

One of my earliest memories is laying on the back shelf of our car, under the rear window, and looking at 68 on the trailer under the flickering lights of the Holland tunnel. Being a part of racing, first as a mascot to the Midget racers and then as a die hard fan, nurtured a strong desire to drive my own race car. Unfortunately, my wallet could never match my aspirations until I was much older and was better able to afford the financial black hole that is racing.

My folks were divorced when I was around eight. My mother moved to California and my dad moved to Florida. He became the president of the National Service Managers Council of Ford and worked at a dealership in Miami. He was an ace mechanic and enjoyed the evolving muscle car market. The custody arrangement called for me to spend summers with my dad as

well as every other Christmas. Every summer in Florida, he would take me to the dealership with him and let me "work" in the service bays. I would be "assigned" to one of the mechanics and would be given various jobs—mostly cleaning things and, in general, getting dirty. I loved it.

At that time in Florida a 14 year-old could get a drivers license. Equipped with that little pink piece of paper, I had quite a time sucking Custom Supreme down the barrels of the various behemoths that my father would give me to drive. I couldn't imagine life being much better than that.

Back in California, I was fortunate to live about a half-hour's drive from Riverside Raceway. It was an amazing place in the early 1960s. In those days, before OSHA, a person could walk, stand, or sit just about anywhere without signing a gazillion waivers. People were trusted to take some responsibility for themselves. When the Cobras arrived at the track, it was just stunning. The heretofore "fast guys" in the Vettes and Jags just watched as the Cobras flew by them. I guess what I experienced was the classic "love at first sight." At that point I would have given a body part, one which I was not making full use of at that time and of which I had two, to own a Cobra. Unfortunately, in those days a Cobra cost half as much as my mother's house. Owning one, at that point, was not possible. However, coveting one was deeply ingrained by my Riverside experiences.

Fast forward to 1994. Being over-educated and over-paid, I soon managed to acquire (in sequence) a 1970 Boss 302, a Sunbeam Tiger, a '66 GT350 Hertz car, a '65 GT350 5S313, and another '65 GT350 5S467. My good friend Jeff Gilbert owns both a small block and a big block Cobra. When I visited him and we gravitated to his garage, I would drool over his cars. Once, he let me take CSX2106 up to Willow Springs for an open track event. Did I

say "good" friend?

Shortly after that, he sat me down and told me, "I don't know how you're going to do it, but if you don't buy a Cobra NOW, you will never forgive yourself." I whined about money and he answered, "You will hate yourself every day for the rest of your life if you don't make the leap."

My calculator mind started whirring. I could sell 5S467 and maybe the Tiger or Boss and come close to what a small block car would cost. So I put the word out. I met some VERY interesting people in the pursuit of a Cobra. Some people wanted money for information. Others who met me at coffee shops intimated that they had the inside track on "the perfect car." None of this proved fruitful.

I came close one time with a lead about a Cobra parked under a tarp on the side of a house. I zipped over there and found the car, exactly as described: under the tarp. There was a motorhome parked in the driveway. It turned out that the Cobra belonged to one of the Offenhauser family. The owner and I pulled off the tarp, most of which stuck to the car. It did start and I drove it up and down the block with the flat spots on the tires thumping away. When I returned, we went into the motorhome. The owner's wife was very guarded and suspicious. She thought I was a cop and refused to sell it to me. Shortly thereafter, Lynn Park discovered the car and was successful in wresting the car from them. He still has it.

Then another of my friends told me about a guy in Northern California who had a Cobra for sale. I got the number and spoke with Mike Tangney. He turned out to be a really nice guy who needed to sell the car at that time. We negotiated back and forth for a while and agreed that I would pay him cash plus give him his choice of either the Boss or the Tiger.

In February of 1994, Mike pulled into my friend Steve's shop, towing a trailer with a Cobra on it. The car looked great. In fact, it was beyond my wildest dreams. We did the deal and he headed back up north pulling a trailer carrying a Boss 302.

That night I couldn't sleep. I went down to the garage and just looked at the car. A real Cobra. MY real Cobra. All of my Riverside memories came flooding back. That melding of the past and the present was profoundly meaningful; as meaningful then as it is now. As time passed, the Cobra became more and more a center point in my life. It was almost if it had a soul with it's own personality that meshed perfectly with mine.

Like many other enthusiasts seriously considering vintage racing, I began to at-



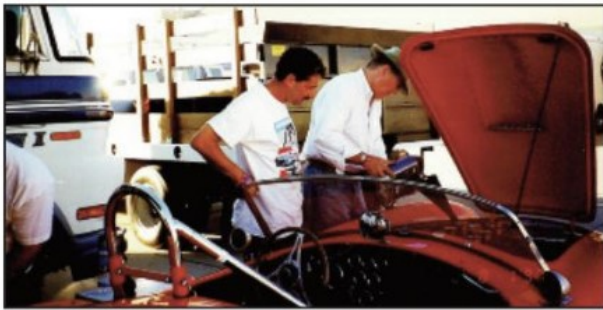
Most drug dealers will give you your first taste of heroin or crack for free because they know that's all it will take to hook you. The hook was set for Zizzo at Willow Springs in 1993 when his pal Jeff Gilbert let him take his small block, CSX2106, to an open track day. He experienced an epiphany and was never the same again.



After learning that CSX2021 was for sale, Zizzo contacted the car's owner, Mike Tangney. And the dance began. This is one of the photos Tangney sent, and that's pretty much all it took. Note the Ferrari-like side vents



One of the first events Zizzo brought the car to was the June 1994 Wine Country Classic at Sears Point. It was billed as a salute to the Daytona Coupe (four were in attendance) and was also a Shelby American team reunion. All of the former Cobra guys were given rides around the track in a Cobra. Zizzo's passenger was Daytona Coupe fabricator John Ohlsen who came all the way from New Zealand. When they came back into the pits he was heard to say, "I'd sooner be set on fire under a Daytona Coupe than take another lap with this guy driving."



Zizzo had his car shipped across the country so he could drive it at Lime Rock at SAAC-25 in 2000. Peter Brock caught up with him in the paddock and noticed that the engine was a quart low. After topping it off, he advised Zizzo to spend a little more time under the hood. "You can sign autographs after the race is over."



Brock holds the hood latch key used on the very early Cobras instead of twist-latches. "If I took this with me, your race would be over." The thought of losing that key made Zizzo break out in a cold sweat.



At the Route 66 celebration in San Bernardino one year, Carroll Shelby was invited to be the event's Grand Marshall. He was not able to attend and asked Zizzo to stand in for him. The event's schedule included a parade, with VIPs riding in convertibles which had their name taped to the side. Riding in the car that said "Carroll Shelby," Zizzo smiled and waved to the crowds, until a number of people began heckling him. "Hey—you're not Shelby!" Zizzo hollered back, "Yes I am. I got a face transplant, not a heart transplant!" After the parade, he returned to his Cobra and found Carol Connors hovering around. She had been attracted to the car like a moth to a front porch light. If the name is somehow familiar, she wrote "Hey Little Cobra."



Zizzo was providing passenger rides for contributors to Shelby's Heart Fund. Things were going well and everyone was feeling warm and fuzzy until one of the Cobra's rear hubs chose Las Vegas Motor Speedway to help the rear wheel and tire escape. Depending on how you look at it, the damage was minimal or horrendous. The car was loaded on a rollback transporter and put in an appearance at the car show on Sunday before heading back to Los Angeles. Carroll Shelby was there to commiserate with Zizzo, who was still shell-shocked. Shelby recalled that back in the day, not every Cobra race resulted in a victory. Zizzo asked Shelby if the car's warranty was still in effect. Just as this photo was snapped, Shelby was advising Zizzo to perform an anatomical impossibility.



Jay Russell's Cobra, CSX2015 [pictured on the right] was prepared to the same basic specifications as CSX2021. The two cars probably sat side-by-side at Shelby American in Venice as they were being completed in 1962. Zizzo and Russell raced against each other frequently, usually changing positions several times during each race.



When you start vintage racing seriously, one of the first things to go is originality. The 289 race engine in 2021 is a long way away from concours. But the goal in racing is to go faster and win races, not to adhere to what was considered correct during a certain time frame when the car was brand new. An obsessive tinkerer, Zizzo became infatuated with the Spalding "Flame Thrower" magneto which was popular in the early 1960s—especially on drag cars but also on some sports racers. He could never get the thing to work without hiccups, so he went to a Vertex magneto. When he opened the hood at a car show or in the paddock, many people who expected to see a distributor car with nine wires coming out of the top would point to it and ask, "What's that?"

tend open track events. By this time Riverside was closed and had been turned into a shopping mall. Willow Springs became my home track. I got to know it pretty well and eventually flogged my GT350s around Turn 9 without excavating the desert next to the track. When Jeff loaned me CSX2106 for an open track event it was the first time I ever drove a Cobra on a track. I can still recall it. It was an amazing experience and the car handled really well. It was actually much easier for me to drive than the GT350.

When I got 2021, I knew that the track was where both of us belonged. I chose the race number 68 because that was my dad's race number on his midget. I attended the University of VARA and obtained my competition license. And then I began climbing the learning curve. Over time I broke both hubs and both spindles on the Cobra. The British metallurgy was abysmal. I had new ones made out of decent metal and never had another catastrophic failure. After twisting the splines off of a stub axle, I converted the car to pin drive. The wire wheels were replaced with some new Phil Schmidt aluminum kidney bean Hali-brands. I also added dual brake master cylinders for a little extra piece of mind.

In racing, as you prepare your car for the track, you eventually discover what works and what fails. It all becomes part of an evolutionary process between car and driver. Over time, you begin to intuitively "know" what your car will do in a given situation. You know what every little noise means and you know when and when not to push things. I quickly began to feel like the car was becoming an extension of me. At speed, there is only the present moment. Your concentration is total. Nothing else exists. CSX2021 was awesome in that regard. It could literally be steered with the throttle. Point it and punch it is one of the magical qualities of driving a Cobra. You can be in a four-wheel drift at 70 mph and feel that the car is solid and as predictable as a rock.

When I first got 2021 there were a number of Cobras that would participate in vintage racing in Southern California. Over the years, the number became fewer and fewer. As Cobra prices increased, the risk of racing became excessive for those people. Other than the Cobras attracted to the annual Monterey Historics, there were only a few of us on the vintage race circuit.

After racing for a few years, it was interesting to see how my car friends changed. At one SAAC event at Las Vegas, I was giving charity rides for Shelby's Heart Fund when a rear hub broke. The wheel and tire ripped out of the rear



fender, leaving a savage gash in the back. Fortunately, the rest of the damage was minimal. During the repairs we decided to strip the paint off the car. Underneath, the aluminum showed the results of more than forty years of sometimes hard use. I didn't want fresh paint to diminish my enthusiasm to continue racing, so I decided to polish the raw aluminum with steel wool (like Shelby had done originally with CSX2000) and keep racing.

No longer were the concourse people interested in hanging around with my paintless, dented old car. Instead, most of my time was spent with other drivers in my run group. When we got together there was always a lot to talk about—and none of it concerned polishing and detailing tips. CSX2021 without paint actually became notorious. People would come up to me and ask, "How can you do that to a real Cobra?" I found that I was really enjoying the negative attention, to the point where I would bring the car to shows so I could sit next to it in a folding chair with my feet up on a fender, smoking a cigar. I would tell people that it was only an old race car and its purpose was to go faster—not look good. A couple of times at the track when I had a tire rub problem, I took a knock-off hammer to the fender. People standing around were wincing like they could actually feel the pain. It was too much for a few and they walked away shaking their heads. The car started to look like a junkyard dog—mean, ugly and nasty.

Trust me, looking at a Cobra is very different from racing one. They are certainly wonderful cars to appreciate for their appearance, and the history they made makes them even more special. But



BIG BORE BASH



The Big Bore Bash on November 22-23 put an exclamation point on VARA's highly successful, season-long 30th anniversary celebration, and marked 50 years of great racing at Willow Springs - "The Fastest Road in the West."

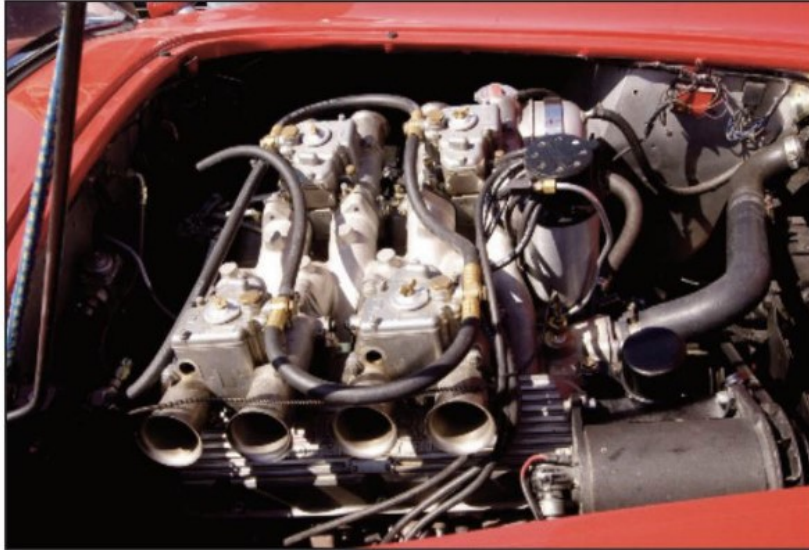
it is also a car that, after some seat time, leaves you with a feeling about what it does and how it does it.

My friend Jay Russel has CSX2015. It

was invoiced in 1962 along with CSX2021. Jay is a great driver and we've had a lot of great times on the track. I think that the best moment I've ever had racing was at

Buttonwillow, out by Bakersfield. Jay and I were on the last lap of the race. We came around the final turn together and we both just punched it. There we were, two geezers in 1962 Cobras, headed for the checkered flag. It was a helluva drag race. I remember pushing the loud pedal as hard as I could and hearing his side pipes blasting, just inches from my door. In the end, my transponder made it across the finish line first. It was quite a moment—in part because it may never happen again.

Despite dents and dings and broken pieces of engine, suspension and axles, CSX2021 has been a part of me for a very long time. When I turned 60, back in 2008, I decided to retire 2021 from racing and get it cherried-out and painted. I had gotten to the point where I was paying more attention to avoiding contact with other cars rather than charging into Turn 1 and letting the chips fall where they may. Nevertheless, I cannot conceive of going out to the garage and not seeing it sitting there, filled with memories and looking meaner than a Junkyard Dog.



CSX2021 had side-draft Webers when the original owner raced it in 1963. When Zizzo decided to take it off the track and restore it, he began looking for a correctly-numbered original 260 cubic-inch short block. He figured the chances of turning up a Weber side-draft intake and carburetors was about the same as finding a vegetarian in a hot dog-eating contest. But that didn't stop him from looking. When he saw one on Craig's List he nearly fell out of his chair. A Chevy guy had a complete set-up that he got as repayment for a debt. He had no use for them and was happy that a buyer materialized. Zizzo reports that the side-drafts work better on the 260 than down-drafts did on a 289.