

California Dreamin'



Sun, sea, sand, Baywatch, bikinis and Beetles? At least that was Steven Haines' original idea. What he actually chose was slightly different. Artistic licence maybe, work of art definitely. Richard Williamson critically acclaims a Cal' look Mini

Cal' look Mini

Once in a while a selection of pics turn up at *MiniWorld* which stir the lounging hacks from their semi-comatose state. Such an occasion was last August when Steven Haines wrote in suggesting we might like to consider featuring his Mini. At first glance our comments were along the lines of 'yeah, looks a nice paintjob but...' Only after a second perusal was the subtlety and artistic beauty of this car truly apparent; rather like a Rodin sculpture, with an added dash of Jackson Pollock, this was one tasteful Mini. More fool us then for not accepting the invitation sooner, but at least it was top of the 'things to do' pile.

Beetle mania

Into the new year, and we really couldn't ignore this crafted custom any longer, so a trip to Walsall was arranged for a day when, typically, it absolutely poured it down – so much for the California beach-type picnics. Termed 'The Cal' Look', Steven's original intention was for a VW Beetle. Actually, as recently as their November '94 issue, one of *MiniWorld's* sister mags, *VolksWorld* featured the very concept that Steven had been thinking of: smooth, seamless, orifice-free panels, soft, pale pastel paintwork, arty speckle and splatter-effect detail, and the customary reduced ride height; if it was a sculpture it would be in a Kensington art gallery. However, the Beetle was out, mainly because Steven couldn't find a decent example for the money available, and so it was back to Minis as he'd already gone through a couple since learning to drive in one – the second which came deseamed, big arches, rollovers. But, it was too rotten to do anything more with.

The look

Then along came a pretty innocuous, six-owner, white 1000 HL of '81 vintage. In desperate need of a new boot floor and A-panels: the rest was acceptable. That was in early 1990, and by June it had gained 1293cc power. Some 1500 miles later, Steven took it off the road in preparation for the 'look'. Firstly, the rear light apertures were welded over and filled, followed by the front indicator holes, then all but the roof guttering seams were removed (he did leave the valance seams, though, for the 'Classic' effect chrome bumpers to hang on), and finally he did away with, initially, external handles, again plating and filling the handle recesses.

It was now mid '91, and further stripping down of the HL revealed the need for a new floor and sills. "I made the inner sills myself" says Steven.

This is no surprise. Having trained as a pattern-maker after leaving school, Steven obviously learned a few fabrication skills: "I like working with my hands" he enthuses, and can



Top: Uncluttered front end features indicators built into the grille

Above: Minimalist rear seats – good for your posture – apparently

Right: Modified Fiat 126 seats give the interior a spacy feel



also boast his own self-made polyurethane/fibreglass surfboards. In fact, he did all the car work himself, including new inner wings and re-fabricating the front bulkhead, investing in a angle grinder and mig welder: "It was that bad."

Working in the garage with the shell resting on cushions, Steven kept telling his dad that "...it would only be in there for a couple of months," promising to work on it every night. "I probably did for a couple of weeks," he admits with a grin.

The underside was painted first, then Steven wheeled the shell around on a cut-down shopping trolley of all things so he could add the galvanised subframes. Having then added the Hi-Build primer (a re-face two-pack type). It was time for the glorious light-yellow colour – '81 Pale Primrose' actually – which he first noticed on a Triumph Spitfire. In all it took five top coats, the last applied in a hired spray unit to give it that extra special finish.



Block and tackle

Time had moved on somewhat in that it was now October '93. On occasions Steven had begun to have doubts about his project, what with all his money tied up in the garage, and

would sometimes go away for the weekend just to get out of having to go back in there. In the meantime, a Metro Turbo engine had stood in a corner ready for mating to the car, but his parents had managed to talk him out of the quest for speed. So, the turbo was set off and with the proceeds, he came a 1293cc in its place.

Following Dave Vizard's *Tuning BL's A-Series Engine* book to the letter, Steven put this together himself: 5 cylinder head, an ex-Longman Sprint Mini EN40B crank, 5 rods, Pomermax pistons, 200 cam, and pressed steel rockers which, in the Vizard book, were claimed to be better than the sintered steel type. Even the HF44 MG Metro carb was modified to Vizard spec, while he then set up the ignition timing using a borrowed



Left: Spattered paint effect extends to the engine and subframes. Steven wishes he'd painted the whole thing black now!

gauge. At a guess he reckons it has 64bhp with the current Montego filter but with a noisier K&N, it should be at least another 10bhp. To finish off, most new parts came courtesy of Mini Spares in North London (via mail order), although some parts such as the rear camber brackets he modified himself. A much more awkward mod was the boot lock, which is actually from a garage door. "I had to climb in the boot to fit it," he remembers. But what a great security idea – it can only be released by a lever under the driver's seat!

Something completely different

Before all the engine was hooked up, Steven made a start on the car's interior. Firstly he ditched the idea of a dash-mounted handbrake (à la 2CV), out too went the bizarre bench seat! In its place however came a pair of Fiat 126 seats he'd seen for a fiver in a scrapheap. "I like the shape; they give the effect of more room" he concludes.

Mind you, he had to customise the frames slightly, adding rear legs as the Mini's floor is nothing like that of a Fiat. In turn, the inertia seatbelt locks were set further back. If you think Fiat seats in a Mini are different, take a look at what there is to sit on in the back! Not so much seats, but the most minimalist cushions you ever did see. In the initial photos, we thought they were fancy stereo speakers, but actually they're six millimetres thick, shaped foam rubber ellipses, covered with black vinyl PVC. This took a bit of messing around with plywood templates. "The shapes remind me of a skeletal structure," he says – very apt considering their use in the car.

The base – covering rear seat, bulkhead and parcel shelf – is made up from MDF (medium density fibreboard), and again has been shaped. "My mate's a joiner" he says, noting the help of a rare third-party.

It seems Steven had a few sleepless nights thinking of what he should do to his Mini

And as for actually sitting in the back? Steven suggests that it's not as uncomfortable a ride as some might think. Indeed some of his friends have personally tested it out and don't appear to have complained!

It's not just the interior shapes themselves that stand out though; it's all accentuated by the contrasting two-tone of the Primrose yellow and black trim, including the not-so-obvious sprayed headlining. "That was a real pain to fit" he remembers. "I was by myself, all night...a



Top: Look no wires. Clever work with the loom makes for a very neat engine bay

Above: Boot houses the filler cap and windscreen washer bottle – neat

heater and a tub of Evo-Stick. Terrible!"

The working end of the cabin is all rather tasty too. Both the standard steering wheel and column are finished in Primrose, with the door panels and dash trimmed in yet more black vinyl. No array of dials either, just one custom speedo showing all the info Steven needs. And what a funny looking indicator – a Mini stalk with Honda MTS0 motorbike piston on top no less!

Splatter flick

Not to be confused with a horror movie – completely the opposite in fact – the term 'speckle and splatter' is exactly as seen here on all the running gear; engine, subframes, suspension, fuel tank, even the inside of the Cooper reverse-rim wheels and speedo. Having first base-painted in Mazda Blue, the effect was created by then flicking on the top colours (Primrose and, if you look closely, a light blue) with nothing more technical than a finger dipped in the paint pot; the more thinned used, the more sparkles Steven created. "The index finger was best" he notes, and in all it took him three weeks of digit-debilitating design to complete one of the most eye-catching works of art we've seen to date. As we said before, very much Jackson Pollock.

Such time-consuming work, but well worth it for the overall effect. Bodacious we might add. Jokingly, he now wishes he'd painted the running gear black, as he wouldn't have to clean

it so much! And to think the idea came when he woke up one night with the idea racing round his brain.

Sleepless 'n subtle

It seems Steven had a few sleepless nights thinking of what he should do to his Mini. For instance, where *should* he put the rear lights? Take a good look – seen them yet? There, in the rear window, tucked up against the vertical-rubber line. Simply a cheapo set from a car accessory shop, but re-wired, re-bulbed and re-lensed. "The originals were useless" he asserts.

Looking at the rear of this Mini there is something else which is not so obvious, except if you went to fill up at a petrol station; where do you put the fuel? Another security feature as the filler neck is inside the boot. Also in the boot is the screen wash bottle and a fabricated section, originally for the impending Metro Turbo rad. "I was so close to the end I didn't want to spend time with all the hosing through the car," he confides.

It's the same at the front. No more protruding wipers, just two subtle clear lenses blending in to the old Austin Seven grille (minus chrome moustache). A closer look at the Cibbié headlamps reveals they are in fact concave. "The kid I got them off had paid a lot of money for them" remembers Steven.

Underneath that badge-less bonnet, an interesting mod is the wiring loom running through the nearside wing rather than the bulkhead, near to where the wiper motor has been re-located on a custom mounting. "It's a bit of a tight fit but the dash unclips out" he adds.

Happy days

By May 1994, Steven decided he could go no further with his pet project. But he was happy enough, and took it along to Shugborough Hall in June to let other Mini fans see the results for themselves. They were impressed; so much so that he won the Custom class – first time out! Later on in October, this time at the Heritage Centre in Gaydon, people were crammed around his creation, keen to see for themselves the extraordinary attention to detail.

So, three years and about £3000 later – "It could be a bit more actually...I don't like thinking about it" – what are Steven's plans for his work of art? Being perfectly open, he thinks the Mini will probably make way for another customisation: "Maybe a 2CV or a Fiat 500...a mate's got a Beetle" he adds with a touch of wishfulness.

Beetle or Mini, whatever he chooses to do, at only 22 years of age and this kind of masterpiece to his credit already, Steven has a sunny future ahead of him. And that's not just on the beach with his surfboard...