



AUTOS AS ART

BENEATH ZIMMERING CHROME PURRS A PONTIAC'S HEART

POMPANO BEACH — It takes a lot of guts to build cars like these, cars with gold spokes on the wheel covers and teak wood running boards and chrome-plated air horns and English walnut dashboards. It takes even more guts to try to sell them with a name like this, to charge \$72,000 for a car that's called The Zimmer.

The Zimmer? Why not call it something sexy or mythic or reeking of power and speed? Windstar or Apollo or something like that? If you had a race horse or a speed boat, would you call it Zimmer? "Mr. Zimmer," explained Tim McRoberts, director of marketing support for the Zimmer Motor Car Co., "is a very strong-willed individual who is very proud of the vehicle and very proud to have his name on it."

"Mr. Zimmer" is Paul Zimmer of Boca Raton, president of the Zimmer Corp. He used to own companies that made yachts and manufactured housing, but those lines of business went soft and he had to cut back a bit, unloading some of his less-profitable operations, keeping the ones that were holding their own, companies like Zimmer Motor Cars.

It's not a big place, the Zimmer plant in Pompano Beach. There are only 60 on-line workers and they only turn out three or four hundred cars a year.

"The number of cars we build in a year," McRoberts said, "is probably what they'd make in about two shifts at one of the Big Three automakers."

But nobody at Ford, Chrysler or General Motors is making anything like this — handmade fiberglass dream machines, outlandish pieces of automotive fantasy, vehicles designed not so much for driving as for drawing a crowd.

"There's nothing subtle about our cars," said Rick Sand, former promotions director for the company. "We're selling automotive art. It doesn't accelerate faster than anybody else's car, it doesn't out-corner them. Our cars are built for people who want to own something that nobody else has."

They make two kinds of Zimmer Motor Cars. There's the Golden Spirit, the \$72,000 model that looks something like an old Deussen, with 24-karat gold trim, a vinyl-covered trunk and

some dandy-looking chrome exhaust outlets that serve absolutely no purpose other than to look cool. They used to make a Golden Spirit limousine as well, a four-door mobile executive suite that sold for nearly \$100,000. But they took too long to build and were taken out of production last year.

Then there's your bargain-priced Zimmer, the \$52,000 Quicksilver, a two-seater that looks something like a Buick on steroids, a chrome-toothed monster that, if you're looking straight into the massive grillwork, bears a strong resemblance to an electric razor from Jupiter.

It takes two weeks to put one of these things together, two weeks of hand-sewing upholstery and hand-painting the hood and hand-sanding the finish. But here's the best part: Underneath that Golden Spirit, there's the guts of a Ford Mustang. And under the Quicksilver? A Pontiac Fiero.

They buy them right off the lot, fully loaded, so they'll have plenty of accessories to build on, and then they strip them down to the chassis, add some extra inches to the frame and set about replacing all the parts that show, the seats and the dashboard and the steering wheel. They also put on special shock absorbers and deepen the trunks. In the process they add about 400 pounds worth of cosmetics to each car, not that any of the buyers seem to mind. After all, what's the point of driving fast in cars like this? You want to go slow enough that people have time to gawk.

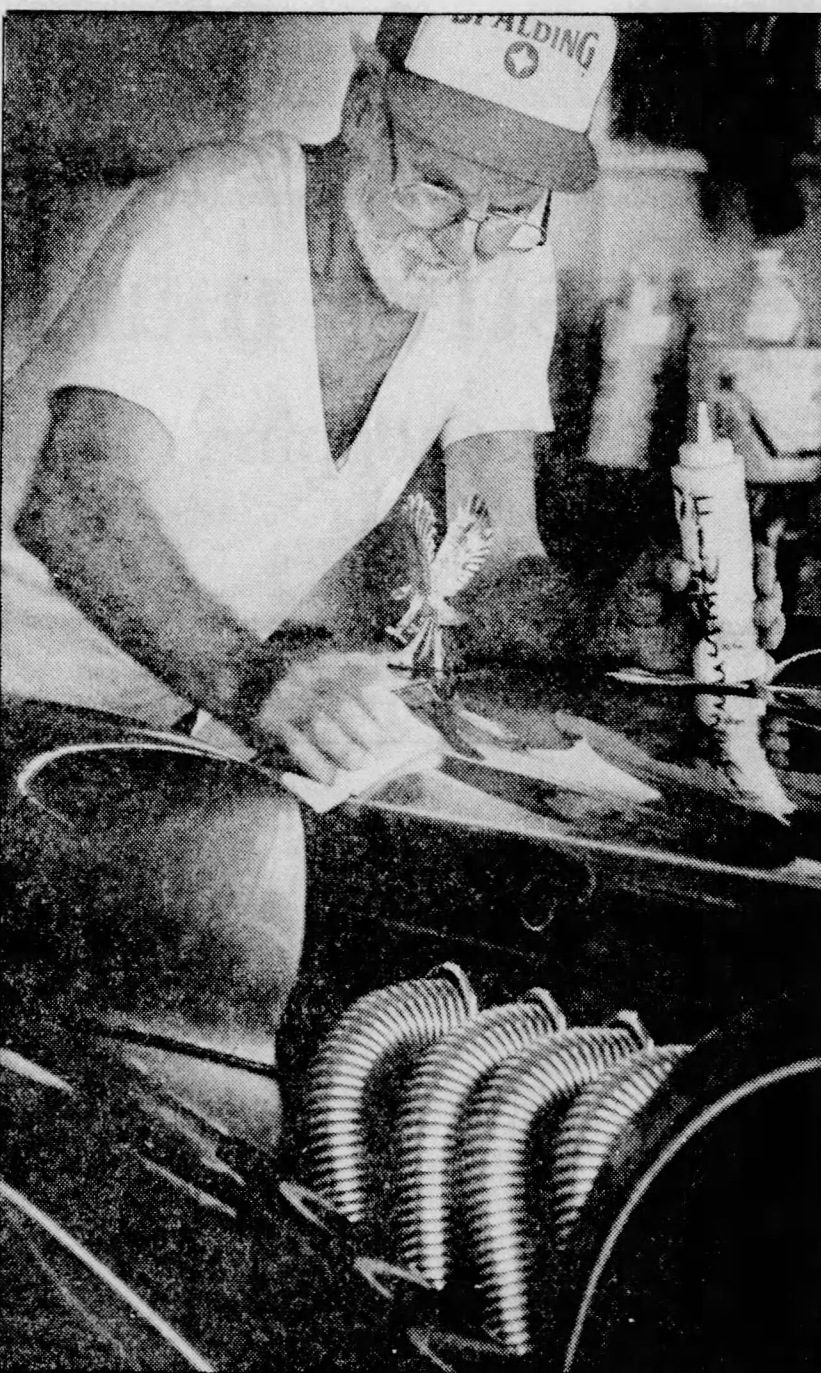
Of course, no one who works here actually owns a Zimmer. No one but Mr. Zimmer can afford one. The Employee of The Month gets to drive one for a night, to a free dinner at an expensive restaurant, but that's as close as the workers get to driving the cars they build.

"Absolutely, if I had the money, I'd buy one," said Anthony "Pepe" Ciance, a touch-up paint specialist. "I doubt if I'd take it to the grocery store or anything. I'd probably put it in a four-car garage and look at it."

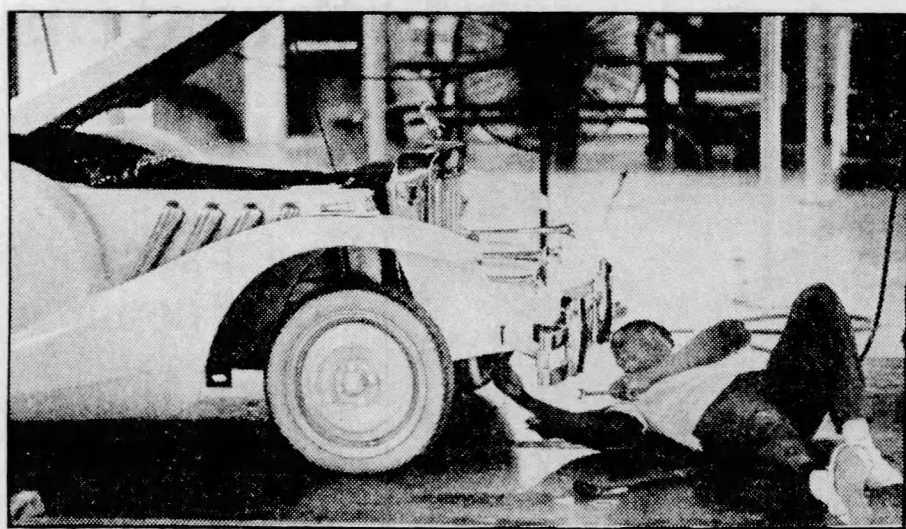
"It's a nice car," said Dexter Staggars, who works in the paint and body shop, "but I don't think I'd buy one. If I had \$70,000, I'd buy a home."



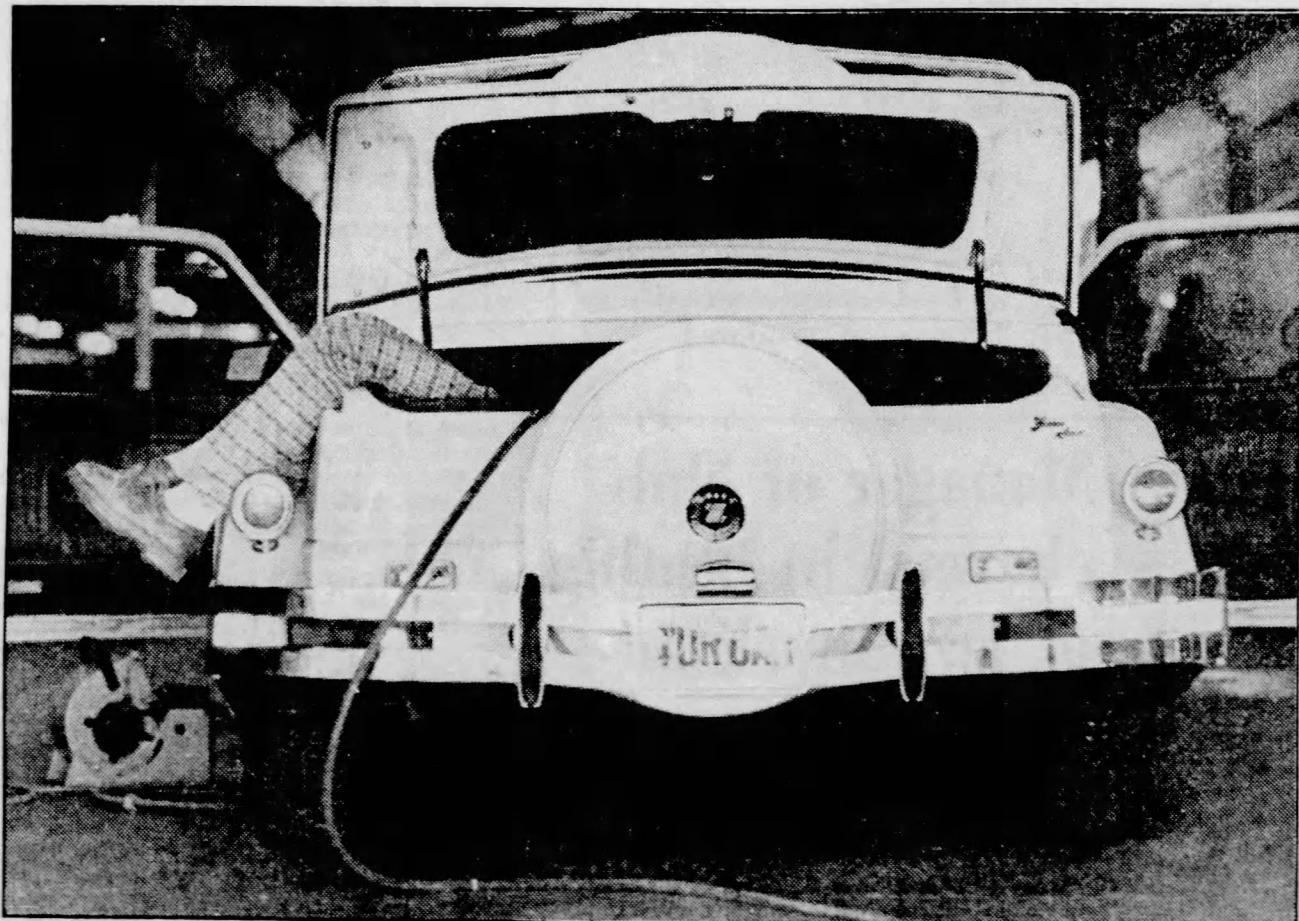
Zimmer's plant pushes out 300 to 400 cars a year, including No. 1,310, a \$72,000 Golden Spirit.



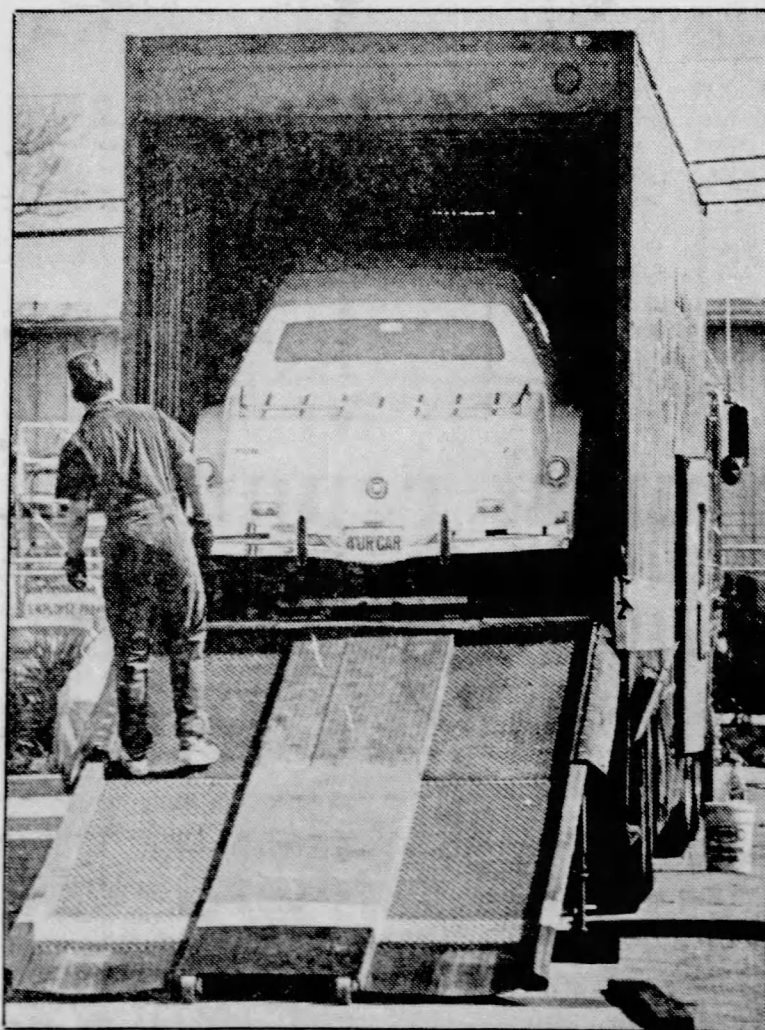
Anthony 'Pepe' Ciance, a touch-up paint specialist, puts some finesse into his work.



A symphony of air horns need protection and bumper man Charles Foulkes sees they get it.



In the age of automation, there remain some jobs only humans can do. This seems one, whatever it may be.



In the end, the cars emerge fully Zimmer-ized and bound for glory and gawks from Broward County to Palm Springs, Calif.

Story by Joe Rhodes □ Photos by Alan Freund