



Mel Torme

Road Tests the Austin-Healey

The singer and sport car enthusiast puts the British import through its paces

BY MEL TORME

A FEW months ago I read a road-test report on the then new Austin-Healey '100' sport car.

On the heels of that report came similar reviews concerning the car and praise glowed like a hot coal bed.

Having owned an MG-TC in 1947, which was exchanged for an XK120 Jag in June of '51, and having experienced the normal woes that every sport car owner resigns himself to when he purchases one, I had to rub my eyes in disbelief when well-known and widely respected auto authorities branded the Austin-Healey 'bug-proof,' 'faultless,' 'superb' and 'exciting to drive.'

All things being equal, it seemed to me a bit premature to attach so many

laudatory adjectives to a new import whose only proven feature over a period of time was its engine, the redoubtable Austin 90 hp. four-cylinder overhead valve powerplant which has reaped for itself a number of honors while residing in that equally vindicated family job, the Austin A90.

Acting upon the assumption that it is literally impossible to tell how a sport car will hold together after having road-tested it for a mere day or two, the Editor of *CAR LIFE*, who is from 'Missouri' like me, asked me to take my newly delivered A-H on the road, drive it to my engagements, live with the car for a few months and then write a road-test report based on usage and trial.

This I did, and whether you contemplate purchasing one of these babies or

are simply an interested spectator, I think the following may be entertaining or even enlightening to you.

After having driven the poor Austin people in New York slightly crazy with repeated requests for delivery of an A-H, since I had seen it in Herb Shriner's International Motor Sports Show early in '53, I was finally promised delivery on September 15. When the 15th rolled around, however, production was slower than anticipated and none was to be had. I had sent my wife and son on to California and when the possibility of no-delivery arose, I suddenly broke out in a cold sweat. I had a picture of myself stranded in the Asphalt Jungle with no way out except by train, plane, boat or llama.

Seeing my predicament, Mr. Melton,



The wire wheels of Torne's special job are chromed but the production models come with painted wire wheels. Mel's car also has an all-aluminum body but the regular Austin-Healey "100", with an eye to traffic hazards, has steel fenders.

head of Austin in New York, and Dave Guthrie, their dynamic little public relations director, came to my rescue. They sold me one of the few hand-made jobs that had been made especially for introduction to the American market. The car had been driven a few hundred miles and was on its way to being broken in. As coincidence would have it, it was the actual car I had seen many months before at the motor show, the very one which was awarded first prize as the most beautiful new sport car.

Unlike the production models which have steel fenders, my buggy is all-aluminum, which may be an advantage in competition, but could be troublesome in normal traffic where dented fenders are an every day occurrence. Austin wisely foresaw this possibility and has re-enforced the body of the production model with enough steel to make any encounter a fairly safe one.

The wire wheels of the prototype are chromed, and although to date they have proven completely satisfactory to me, I am told that Austin turned out the production models with painted wire wheels because the chrome had a tendency to flake and crack when exposed to weather and rough driving conditions, thereby increasing the stress and decreasing the strength of the wheel.

Further production modifications include a polished aluminum cockpit cowl trim, in place of chrome that glares too much in the sun; a master electrical switch, in the trunk, which positively cuts off all electrical power; a steel rear deck lid; steel hood lid; an ash tray placed between the bucket seats in the drive shaft; a four-bladed fan, and a larger radiator for cooling purposes.

I took delivery on September 16 and looked forward eagerly to my tour which took me from New York to Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Cleveland, Detroit, Dayton, Dallas, Birmingham and Los

Angeles—7,500 miles that would serve to acquaint me with the finer and foibles of the Austin-Healey.

Al Pellegrini, my piano-playing accompanist, merely growled unintelligibly. He owns an Olds 88.

We left New York and made fairly good time on the road to Cincinnati, but around fifty miles out I began to hear a clanking noise on the left rear side of the car. I thought the tail pipe or muffler had come loose and made a mental note to have it checked in Cincy the following day. It's lucky I didn't forget it. We nearly got clobbered the next day, thanks to that supposedly loose tail pipe.

On the way to the Austin dealer in Cincinnati (Foreign Auto Imports) I had to stop for a red light. I put on the brakes.

No brakes. No nothing.

The brake pedal went to the floor and stayed there.

In the meantime, assorted and sundry bunches of Detroit iron started coming at me as I rolled into the middle of the intersection at 30 mph.

Pellegrini, in one of his rare moments of perception, had presence of mind enough to grab frantically at the hand

brake which protrudes between the seats and we did a cute little half-spin on macadam which was just drying from a morning rain and came to a stop scant inches from a hulking brute of a Packard whose driver berated us noisily.

I turned to Al and said, "That's using the old eye, Kid. That's being on the ball, Boy. Atta fella!"

Pellegrini growled again.

We proceeded cautiously to Foreign Auto Imports and discovered what that loose tail pipe noise was and why we had no brakes.

There is a steel plate welded to each side of the box frame in the rear of the car. From each plate extends a bracket which in turn holds the shock absorber. The brackets were, unfortunately, too thin to properly support the shocks, and the left rear one had broken, leaving the shock to dangle uselessly and clank against the frame.

Apparently the free-swinging shock had, at one point, made a complete turn around the solitary bolt that kept it from falling off entirely and had sheared the flexible hydraulic brake line, which brake line immediately relieved itself of all the brake fluid as quickly as a second baseman's double-play peg to first. Hence... no brakes. What laughs!

In all fairness, I should remind you that my Austin-Healey was a sample model and the Austin people assure me that the fault was corrected before the production cars were put on the market. In fact, friends of mine who have purchased production Austin-Healeys have experienced no brake difficulty.

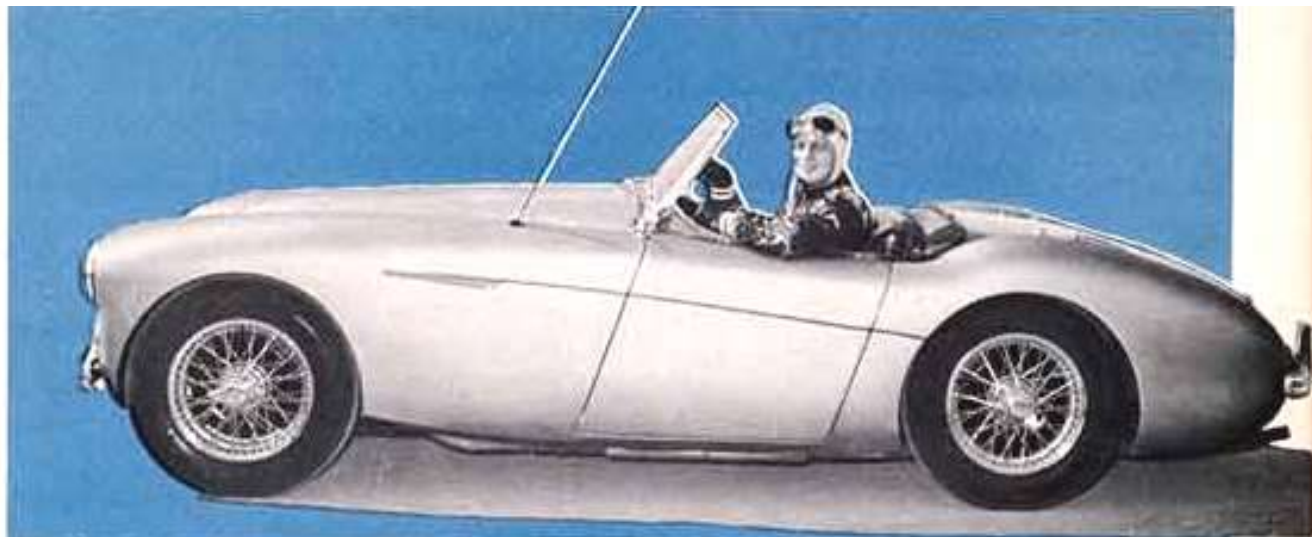
At any rate, I had the bracket welded and the brake line repaired and drove on to Indianapolis.

As it turned out, 1953 AAA champ Sam Hanks was in town, running tire tests for Firestone at the Indianapolis Speedway. Sam and I had become friends when I played Indy during race week of last year, and when he and Bill McCrary of Firestone invited me out to the Brickyard to watch the tests I jumped at the offer.

Next day I drove the '100' out to the mammoth Sixteenth Street oval. Hanks

The simplicity of design in the new Austin-Healey is graphically shown in this front view. Torne is at the wheel.





Tarme drove his sleek beauty 7,500 miles cross-country in order to learn all of its fine points and foibles.

look one look at it and remarked, speculatively, "That's a cute buggy you've got there, Mel. What'll she do?"

"Why don't you find out for yourself, Sam?" I replied. He said okay and climbed into the driver's seat, while I moved over. We went into the first turn at 50 and came out of it onto the backstretch at 70. Sam put the accelerator down to the floorboard and kept it there.

The tach and the speedometer began

to climb and I kept waiting for him to back off. He just sat there, calm and relaxed, doing 95 as we hit the north-west turn and we went into it flat out. We stayed that way until we reached the pits, and we rolled in with Sam nodding approvingly and me looking slightly green around the gills. (I make a lousy passenger!)

All in all, the car made six circuits around the 2½-mile course and the consensus was that she ran and cornered

like a race car. Sam said he'd driven a Jag around the track once and that the Austin out-handled the XK a good 10 to one. Having owned both cars, I concur.

The Laycock-De Normanville overdrive unit particularly intrigued the Firestone bunch. The key to the unit is a simple toggle switch placed conveniently on the dash at the driver's fingertip. In usual city traffic the switch remains in 'normal' position. On the road or at speeds in excess of 40 mph, (the speed in which the overdrive unit takes hold), the toggle is in the upper or 'overdrive' position.

The great saving of gas and wear and tear on your engine will make you bless this unit many times over.

For instance, in normal drive the engine turns 3,000 rpm. at 60 mph. In overdrive, the same 60 mph, is accomplished at 2,000 revs. Likewise, she'll do a 'grunt-and-groan' 100 mph. at 5,000 laborious revs in normal, while overdrive gets it done at 3,700.

The highest speed I was able to attain was on a strip of excellent divided highway between Texarkana and Dallas, at which time I pushed her at 111 mph. (speedometer, not clocked) and she stuck to the road like glue.

I have a feeling if a perfect car were invented the automobile companies would be thrown into a bigger panic than Black Tuesday back in '29 ever hoped to be. I'm sure that from the humblest Crosley owner to the most regal possessor of a Pegaso, mutual notes could be compared on the subject of "what's wrong with my car." Austin-Healey owners will be no exception, and it's perfectly natural.

For, paragon though she may be, the Healey '100' is, like every car I ever drove or owned, guilty of a number of minute bad habits and a few glaring faults.

On the tiny side of the ledger are trivia like insufficient weather stripping and nearly ineffectual brackets to hold



The drive shaft of the ground-hugging Austin-Healey divides the roomy seats.



Despite the compactness of the Healey, the rear compartment affords plenty of room for luggage and spare tire. A master switch in the trunk cuts off all power.

the convertible top down. Beside making the car an icebox at night, despite the excellent heater that's provided as standard equipment, these brackets kept loosening and slipping off the little knobs which protrude from the windshield. On one occasion, with no warning, both flimsy brackets slipped while I was doing about 80 and the wind nearly ripped the top completely off the car.

Also, the windshield, when lowered into a 'scuttle' position for competition, is useless. On top of hindering your vision, it offers no protection from the wind at all, and you find yourself struggling for breath if you drive over 20 mph.

On the more serious side, the motor heat makes the cockpit about as hot as a Marilyn Monroe calendar. At times the heat is so unbearable you have to stop and turn the engine off.

The production models have some asbestos sheeting appended to absorb some of the heat, but I've a feeling Austin will have to figure out something more satisfactory.

A few more relatively unimportant points would round out the above, but why carp? The Austin folks and Donald Healey are well aware of what is wrong and much of the trouble has been alleviated, as witness the foregoing comments earlier in this report as far as the production models are concerned.

Your \$3,000 investment begins to look awfully good, by the way, when you take your car in for servicing at your local dealer's establishment. Having had to grit my teeth in the face of some of the snottiest treatment ever to mar the escheteon of the sport car clan when I had my Jag, I'm here to inform you that the service, courtesy, understanding and interest I received at the hands of the various Austin dealers around the country was indeed gratifying.

Hollywood Auto Accessories, (Austin dealer in Dayton) serviced my car with authority and promptness, and so did the dealer in Indianapolis. Lawrence

Falvey, head of Falvey Motors which handles the Austin franchise in Detroit, met me on a Sunday to discuss the shock absorber situation and to help determine the most effective solution.

The gold star winners however, for my shekels, are Foreign Auto Imports in Cincinnati and Clarence Talley Motors in Dallas. John Talley, of the latter concern, would not let my car leave the shop until it was right. Getting it right after the long trip from Dayton took the better part of three working days and I was only charged for that work which was essential to making the auto run properly.

Little items which I know I would have been billed for by other sport car handlers were simply not mentioned in my bill. There were a lot of little items.

Likewise, Bill O'Mallion of the Cin-

cinnati firm started work on my car on Monday morning at 11 o'clock and finished after midnight. On another occasion, a few weeks later, I passed through Cincy and brought the car in to him again. He worked on it most of the day and part of the evening. Oh, yes, one more thing. That was a Sunday. If you think I got that kind of treatment because my Healey was the first these people had a chance to work on or for any other reason, you can just forget it.

Bill O'Mallion summed it up for all the agencies when he said, "So much damage has been done public-relation-wise in the sport car sales and service field that we think it's about time the customers got a fair shake, not only in the prices we charge for servicing their vehicles, but in our attitude toward them.

"After all, if it wasn't for them there'd be no Foreign Auto Imports of Cincinnati and our merchandise should be sold to them as pleasantly and attractively as any other standard product on the American market."

Wise words, Bill! I have a feeling the other large agencies are feeling the brunt of such extraordinary behavior as yours. I'm not surprised at all that the big powers in Coventry, England, after viewing the beautiful lines and the moderate price of the Austin '100' lowered the price on their pride and joy by \$800.

When they got a load of the excellent service and reasonable prices to be had under the Austin aegis, radical measures will probably be taken in that department, if they hope to compete successfully with the Austin product.

Hey, I'm starting to sound like those enthusiasts I mentioned at the beginning of this article, but I can't help myself! I am sold! Nine weeks and nearly 8,000 miles later, I am more than willing to admit that the Austin-Healey '100' is Britain's best buy! ☆ ☆



A nostalgic reminder of the early days of motoring, with garages few and far between, is this rather complete kit of fine tools which comes with the Healey.

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**MEL TORME TESTS
THE AUSTIN-HEALEY**

JUNE 1954

**THE ILLUSTRATED
MOTOR MAGAZINE**



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INDIANAPOLIS 1954

From: Editorgary@aol.com
Date: Mon, 30 Jul 2007 11:31:27 EDT
To: healeys@autox.team.net
Subject: [Healeys] two Questions, one answered

Thanks to everyone who referred me to the Torme article in Sports Car Life, including references to an online scan, and even a place to buy a copy of the issue of that magazine.

However, no one rose to the second question, not even Pat Quinn who introduced me to the one example I've ever seen of the limited-production rally Healeys built to commemorate Pat Moss's win on the Liege Rally. Does ANYONE know ANYTHING about these cars?

Cheers, --Gary

Date: Sun, 29 Jul 2007 21:08:06 -0500
From: "Alan Seigrist" <healey.nut@gmail.com>
To: Editorgary@aol.com, healeys@autox.team.net
Subject: Re: [Healeys] Two Questions for the group

Gary - As a fan of both Mel Torme and Healeys (both, strangely, before my time - I am 41), I have the original article and magazine at home. I am happy to scan and send to you tonight.

Best, --Alan

From: "Jim Leshner" <cleona44@hotmail.com>
To: Editorgary@aol.com, healeys@autox.team.net
Date: Sun, 29 Jul 2007 21:43:15 -0400
Subject: Re: [Healeys] Two Questions for the group

Gary - the answer to question 2 the Mel Torme test is reviewed in Car Life, June 1954 issue, pp 64 to 67 - some nice period photos, including the tool kit, also back cover has a color of the 100 with Mel. I hope that helps with your needs.

--jim leshner

Date: Mon, 30 Jul 2007 11:26:15 -0400 (EDT)
From: "J. Scott Morris" <jstmorris@yahoo.com>
Subject: Re: [Healeys] Two Questions for the group
To: Editorgary@aol.com, healeys@autox.team.net

Hi Gary; In regards to your second question, the Mel Torme Austin Healey 100 road test was in Car Life, June 1954. A copy is available for purchase at:

<http://www.abebooks.com/servlet/BookDetailsPL?bi=697846502&searchurl=vcatn%3DCars%252C%2BTrucks%252C%2BRacing%26vci%3D2980386%26vcat%3D4069282>

If you wish to review a copy online, check out <http://home.san.rr.com/fsheff/oldpapr2.htm> but disregard the quoted "May" date.

--Scott Morris, Simcoe, Ontario, Canada; '60 MkI BN7, '62 MkII BT7

- Keep Smiling, Murphy Lives

Editorgary@aol.com wrote: << I've recently bumped into two questions that perhaps someone in the group has a >>

From: Editorgary@aol.com
Date: Sun, 29 Jul 2007 20:38:02 EDT
To: healeys@autox.team.net
Subject: [Healeys] Two Questions for the group

I've recently bumped into two questions that perhaps someone in the group has a reference from which to answer:

1. Does anyone know how many of the commemorative Liege Healeys that were produced after Pat Moss's win in that long-distance rally? I remember seeing one in the metal in Australia, complete with hardtop and Liege decal on the window many years ago, and remember seeing the brochure on the car, but have never seen anything else on these cars. Details, anyone?

2. Can anyone give me the reference to the Mel Torme road test of the 100? I've gotten a line on some new info on that and would like to find the original article.

Thanks, --Gary