

PODCAST - TECHNOCOMPLEX

"Clubs, friends, cars, memories. Changing mixtures."

Published: March 2, 2023

by Mark R. DeLong

INTRO

SOUND machinery revving.

NARRATOR

This is Technocomplex.

SOUND hammering on an anvil, metal scraping. Shop noises.

FADE

MARK DELONG

I'm Mark DeLong, keeper of a newsletter and now, with this first stab at a podcast, giving aural dimensions a whirl.

(PAUSE)

This podcast is based on a chapter in my book project. It's about friendships, clubs, and how we get together when we're far apart.

(PAUSE)

David Byrne, one of the founders of Talking Heads, wrote an essay that appeared in the MIT Technology Review a few years ago. It bore the title "Eliminating the Human."

(PAUSE)

Here's what he had to say at one point:

(PAUSE)

We have evolved as social creatures, and our ability to cooperate is one of the big factors in our success. I would argue that social interaction and cooperation, the kind that makes us who we are, is something our tools can augment but not replace. When interaction becomes a strange and unfamiliar thing, then we will have changed who and what we are as a species.

(PAUSE)

This is a story about a quiet change of the ways we're relating as we consider cars together.

SOUNDS of anvil hammering, gradually fading onto the "Anvil Chorus" of Verdi's Il Trovatore.

MARK DELONG

Ever hammered to the accompaniment of the "Anvil Chorus" from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*? I have, I think. It's a good accompaniment to car work, perhaps more along the lines of hammer beating than wrenching, though. For better or worse, the Metropolitan Opera provided most of the background music of my restoration. I wrenched and hammered on Saturday afternoons, when Met performances were broadcast, early in my car restoration on the Texaco Metropolitan Opera Radio Network and then, shortly into my garage work, the philanthropic baton was picked up by Toll Brothers who kept the sopranos singing on the radio. Despite the occasional too-much-warble of a soprano aria, I actually found Met performances a reassuring accompaniment.

(PAUSE)

"In the end, everything turns into opera," someone -- perhaps a composer -- is supposed to have said. Everything includes car restorations, all of them have their operatic qualities -- many cruelly tragic, a few uplifting, soaring. Like opera, the garage is a place of obsession. Frustrated dreams. Passionate disagreement and fraternal accord. Human weakness and fallibility. Arias of success and also of unrequited love. In a garage you can be driven insane or into poverty as well as learn and discover riches.

(PAUSE)

Another operatic quip I've run into is "opera is the most expensive noise in the world" -- supposedly said by musical comedy actor Michael Coyne back in 1915.

(MORE)

MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

(PAUSE)

Most garage car restorations have a lead singer, and for the most part they occupy the stage alone or nearly alone. That was the case with my car restoration, though many of the hours I spent huddled with my sons, then in their teens. But lone wrenchers in the garage nearly always have an accompaniment, their own chorus and orchestra. All operas do.

SOUND opera aria

MARK DELONG

It has almost always been that way. The car and all it means and brings with it teach and shape, since the car, like a prima donna, can be finicky, difficult, haughty, but also charmingly beautiful and exciting.

(PAUSE)

Today's operatic chorus inhabits the clubs and increasingly the Internet car forums.

A convergence of an aging car generation (maybe the last of the car generations) and a new form of unembodied interaction in the Internet are gradually changing the world of car clubs.

SOUND modem connecting.

MARK DELONG

In 2002 I bought the proverbial "basketcase." What I needed was advice. Before the purchase would have been better timing for advice, perhaps, but I do think I still would have sent the check and fetched the car's sorry remnants even though wise advisors would have frantically tried to wave me off.

Wise advisors would have been more convincing, I am sure, if they'd been present in real life -- perhaps as fellow members of a car club.

(MORE)

MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

But where I live, a classic car club wasn't easy to find in the early 2000s. Times for real life clubs are tougher now as club officers fret about the aging of club membership. The average age estimated in the sixties. Many clubs make a special effort to attract younger members. Consolidation of clubs has helped a bit to bolster club numbers, too.

New habits of getting information have eroded the attraction of a regular monthly meeting of a car club, perhaps at a local diner or restaurant. If the pornography industry was an early adopter of the Internet and a spur to its development, car restorers and enthusiasts weren't far behind. The passion and the immediacy of car questions and opinions also made a good fit for the net.

(PAUSE)

Media, print or not, has always played a role in the life of cars. For the most part, the "old-car hobby" -- that is, the hobby of restoring old cars -- had support from publications and from car clubs, where the experience of driving and repair arose from real human interactions. According to historian David N. Lucsko, the first publications on the old-car hobby in the US only appeared after World War II. The earliest one he found was from 1947. In the early 1950s old car articles appeared in car publications like *Motor Trend* and *Car Life*, and in 1954, Emmett Hemmings first published *Hemmings Motor News*. Its first edition was a slim four-pages offered for fifty cents. From the first, its mission was to support car collector enthusiasts.

(MORE)

MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

You can think of print media like *Hemmings* as making up the sinews of a continent-wide body of collectors and restorer-hobbyists, giving individuals -- well, mostly men -- a picture of a greater landscape of car collecting, not to mention the opportunity to scare up parts from junked cars. *Hemmings* continues to be important source for collector car sales, in large part because of *Hemmings* online presence, which was launched in 1998.

(PAUSE)

Twenty years ago, I needed a club, or something. Today, one website told me that I could probably join nearly a hundred clubs in North Carolina, one of them specializing in British cars. My own research has scared up many more, though clubs do seem to wax and wane, and frankly nothing is handy to where I live in the sticks. I have had to settle for online options.

Clubs and online forums do one thing pretty well. They concentrate skill

(PAUSE)

or at least they concentrate opinions, as is often the case with matters of old-car restoration. Often consensus eludes discussion, and that may especially be the case with forums, since messages come forth without the blessings of context.

SOUND people chattering.

MARK DELONG

In Real Life, such context is essentially a given. You hear tones of voice and see the moments of consideration -- the wrinkled brows, skepticism, doubt. You capture nuances of manner and personal history.

(MORE)

MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

Online those cues lack, and though we might feel they can be supplanted by other cues that are tractable in a digital world we also have learned that bits and bytes can deliver lies. "On the Internet, they can't tell you're a dog."

I regularly lurked on the Jag-Lovers E-type forum, and I still check in, though not nearly as often as when confusion and restoration innocence made me open the web browser every evening. I have discovered that the place is actually pretty unique, since it is welcoming and fresh. Trolls have been kept at bay, perhaps largely because of rigorous post moderation and a strict ban on politics. It's open to all comers. Some forums require, say, ownership of a model, a membership fee, or an application of some sort. Many, like me, are amateurs and Do-It-Yourself'ers who either never had or have given up hopes of *concours d'elegance* car show distinction. But car shows do motivate others, and they have precise and valuable knowledge of every detail and every part. Motivations mix on Jag-Lovers, and the whole place is enriched and sometimes even noisy in disagreement.

Decency of people helps, of course. And that's not always to be expected in the car forum world, most of which is made up of what looks like a running "comments section" full of questions, answers, rumors, opinions, and snide remarks. Trolls are ready to strike, and long threads of once useful discussion are derailed by someone with an ill-advised, smart-ass, throw-away comment -- which may or may not have been intended to disrupt and hurt.

(MORE)

MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

Rude and trollish responses on car forums have even become a source of parody.

The sometimes off-color and satirical parody website *Sniff Petrol* included a feature called "Ask A Total Prick From An Internet Forum."

"First of all, welcome to the site," Total Prick responded to a fairly typical first poster. "Secondly, is this how you would normally introduce yourself? You just come in here and start asking questions like you own the place? Get some manners."

Total Prick wouldn't make it through the Jag-Lovers moderators, most of the time at least. I've seen compassion on the forum, and I have to admit that it is surprising in an odd way.

SOUND car starting.

MARK DELONG

In March 2021, she jumped in with a hello and a short description of her situation. Dad lost to cancer. Now she feels compelled to finish a job he had brought a long way. "Have lofty dreams of completing the restoration as I promised him I would," she said when she introduced herself. "Many pictures and even more questions to come I am sure." The problem, she said, was a matter of knowing where to start. Her car is a Jaguar E-type 1.5 Series, a short lived "in-between" model that allowed Jaguar Cars to exhaust parts from the Series 1 before tuning its assembly line entirely to Series 2.

Hers was a not unfamiliar situation, as the first response from another member who had lost his wife to cancer also showed. Others also knew the motivation to keep promises to those who had passed.

(MORE)

MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

The virtual clubhouse door was open -- a place where she could find good advice and even an embrace of understanding and support. Pictures Nicole posted clearly showed that her father's work had been meticulous, though incomplete, and the car looked as though it was well on its way to become a fine example of the model.

Everyone's responses I saw were not only sensitive to the situation but also enthusiastic about helping a daughter fulfill her promise to her father. And, indeed, many pictures and helpful and humorous exchanges followed -- exchanges that would have been magnified in their humanity had they taken place across the table at a restaurant or, better, huddled over the engine compartment of a car. But for an online forum, good enough. Even more than good enough.

(PAUSE)

Memories. It's the memories that get tied up with the sheetmetal, leather, paint, and tire rubber.

I talked with Paul Wigton a little while after I saw Nicole's debut on the car forum. Paul is known as "Wiggles" on the Jag-Lovers forums, and he's been an active participant as long as I can remember.

Paul also had a wealth of memories, many of them tied to his parent. And I recall seeing him link his car -- named "Tweetie," by the way -- with his mother and father. Now in his sixties, he recalled his family's E-type when he was a nine-year-old.

PAUL WIGTON

And of course I have this bucket load of memories that go back, you know, since I was a kid. I remember in 1966 or 65 or 66.

(MORE)

PAUL WIGTON (CONT'D)

It was 66 when *Grand Prix* came out and my parents were well known in Denver for their automotive activities, and they were kind of guests of honor at the at the Denver premiere of the movie. So, Dad and Mom and I drove in the E-type. We drove right up to the front of the Cooper Theater and with this big fanfare and red carpet and the whole bling, I popped out of the back from the hatch 'cause when I was nine years old I would sit in the back of the coupe.

...

You know, it's a huge, long list of memories so I missed the car. I still have all the memories. Yeah, and the only thing that will take them from me is Alzheimers, and I hope I don't get that anytime soon.

MARK DELONG

Memory is the key for Paul, and for many of the people I virtually met on Jag-Lovers. For some, the memories are intensely personal like Nicole's and Paul's. For others, the memories are about the car model itself. Its history. Its racing heritage. Its lineage among sport cars. And, of course, how their work on the cars manage to sustain that memory.

(PAUSE)

The luckiest on the Jag-Lovers forum have advantages of proximity, and they share their car trips and meetings with the rest of the E-type world.

Sometimes the intersection of Real Life and the digital magnifies and expands connections. In 2017, frequent contributor and level-headed E-type enthusiast Jerry Mouton died while on a "Big Sky Oil Leak Tour," a driving tour he had taken part in for years. Reports of his death quickly circulated on Jag-Lovers.

(MORE)

MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

It was shocking even for those of us who had never met Jerry in real life. His motto was *laissez les bons temps rouler*. Fellow Bay Area Jaguar club members gathered their E-types for his funeral procession. Others, more far flung, probably took part as well. In this case and in others, the Jag-Lovers E-type forum magnified human connections that in many cases, including mine, initially follows the thin thread of a car, a sole point of commonality.

SOUND car starting

MARK DELONG

Hagerty Insurance, valuable core of the Hagerty group of companies, relies on the continuation of the old car hobby. They insure vintage cars and have recently expanded the scope of their activities after a successful stock offering. For years as a private company, Hagerty has compiled insurance data and car valuation information. Now a publicly traded company (HGTY), Hagerty leverages the social aspect of car collecting in its "Garage + Social" with locations in six North American cities as of January 2022.

"Think of Garage + Social as your clubhouse," the company's website says. "Stop by, grab a coffee, admire some cars and hang out with fellow automotive enthusiasts." The locations are, literally, garages, with the standard "membership" including storage of classics in air conditioned and "dust-free garages with 24/7 security" and service that "covers all aspects of collection management." Don't have a classic, but want to rub elbows with those who do?

(MORE)

MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

A "social membership" includes "all the social perks, without the storage" and starts at \$125/month.

The structure of the Garage + Social set up echoes the structure of many "equestrian centers" or, as the common folk put it, "horse barns." Each has a staffing structure that centers on care of their respective beasts, monthly fees are comparable, and active members are curiously tipped toward one sex (not the same one, by the way). Garage + Social at Delray Beach has four "DIY mechanic bays," but horse barns all have some place of grooming an animal who's needing some work. At each Garage + Social site, such care can be arranged for the cars, including everything "from basic wash-n-wax to comprehensive detailing." The person who arranges has the lofty title "concierge." Many horse barns offer riding opportunities and training sessions analogous to the driving activities and events that Garage + Social facilities offer.

Of course, it's good to remember that horse barns and recreational riding became the center of equestrian activity as the horse yielded the roadways to the car. Could Garage + Social be the early signs of something like that for the automobile? The car, after all, is under pressure, requiring either a revolutionary move to a different kind of fuel or an equally important and considerably more drastic reconsideration of the car's centrality, especially in urban life.

Perhaps feeling that the car or its "culture" is imperiled, McKeel Hagerty, chief executive of Hagerty, told *New York Times* business reporter Brett Bert, "The purpose of the company is to save driving and car culture.

(MORE)

MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

If we're going to save car culture, we have to make investments outside of the core business, and really help create a whole ecosystem." In light of his company's car-supporting activities, McKeel Hagerty's "car culture" looks to me a lot like today's "horse culture" -- cordoned off, mostly affluent, and limited to recreation and sport.

SOUND horse whinnying

MARK DELONG

A common car club meeting format -- coffee and the car -- has been adopted and transformed, too. It's been turned into a hybrid real life/social media form called, what else? -- "Cars and Coffee." You can search the web for such events by entering "cars and coffee" and a nearby city -- say, Raleigh, North Carolina -- and often get a website that uses "cars and coffee" as part of its name. The two go together as they have for years in real life car clubs.

But the idea has also become part of a franchise of sorts, with an international reach, and using the web as an organizing tool. You can see the website at "Cars [dot] Coffee" -- but you'll find that the events are rather dated.

(PAUSE)

We did have this thing called a pandemic.

(PAUSE)

A Facebook group has more current information. Visit the Facebook page, and you'll immediately notice that the target audience for Cars and Coffee is quite different from Hagerty's Garage + Social. But the interesting thing is that the cars at the center of both groups are very similar.

(PAUSE)

They are inaccessibly expensive.

(MORE)

MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

Some of them undoubtedly supercars, many of them possessed for the sake of waxing and showing off.

The cars are the items shared. Not the memories or snippets of car information and expertise. There are even rules of etiquette, enumerated by *HotCars* writer James Jacobs. "Basically, Cars and Coffee is an organized car/owner meet-up where beautiful vehicles and their fabulously wealthy owners come together," he wrote in pre-Covid October 2019. "Along with this, thousands of spectators usually join in for the sights and sounds." He lists ten rules, and quite clearly shows that there are two groups: the coffee drinkers (like me) and the champagne-sippers who let you ogle their cars.

Rule number six is "Don't try to show off your rust bucket." Jacobs adds that the Cars and Coffee events are unlike what you "find at a Walmart parking lot at three in the morning." The cars, at least, don't appear in Walmart parking lots, but most of those who attend a "show" certainly have pulled into a Walmart parking space. Maybe even with regularity.

(PAUSE)

As I've looked over the landscape of cars and clubs, I sense a drift from a focus on enthusiasts -- the rust bucket owners or not -- toward wandering spectators. Perhaps the movement isn't so bad, because it may give us a certain distance from the tyranny of the car.

But I do feel a certain loss. The kind of loss of memory that many in car clubs share and treasure

(PAUSE)

and closely associate with their cars, owned or lost to trade-in, waxed and polished or rusted old buckets.

(MORE) '

MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

The car and its owners are quietly entering a new age of enthusiasms.

END

OUTRO