



Eccentric Spirit? It's in the Vault!

VON DUTCH & THE COLLECTOR CAR VAULT

STORY BY STEVE KITTRELL

Renaissance men hardly ever get recognized when they are at the height of their talent. And nothing holds truer to this statement in recent decades than the groundbreaking painter, Kenny Howard, known to us as Von Dutch. A very gifted, rebellious and outspoken character at times, but also a solitary and fiercely tenacious individual, Von Dutch played the part of starving artist well and the pain he projected bled through his work. You know who I'm talking about. Remember the flooding of trucker hats in the early 2000s donned by the likes of Ashton Kutcher, Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake? Those oddball hot rod designs and distinctive script of a Von Dutch Original patched hat could be seen on the streets of Los Angeles and flashing across the MTV movie awards. Why is he important to this story? Let's take a trip to the origins of Kustom car Kulture, down the coast of Southern California while looking at what the future holds for the legacy of a sequestered classic car heaven called the Collector Car Vault.

I've heard about a place just off the beaten path— one where time stands still between a grove of avocado trees, thousands of individual cacti and rare succulent plants. Six buildings settled over 3.5 acres of prime farm land in the small town of Santa Paula, California - 45 miles south of Santa Barbara is where the vault exists. Likewise, it's the site of our reclusive artist, where motorcycles and hot rods were personalized, knives and guns were meticulously engraved, and the legend of the original pin stripper began, then passed away. The Collector Car Vault is now the occupant of this two-level retired fruit packing

facility, housing some of the finest automobiles around, deep below the grounds' surface.

Once inside the estate you'll find a very well-maintained courtyard with an eager staff bustling around in golf carts and trailers. A small tin-roofed brick building to the right is the office, which once served as Von's art studio (along with reportedly hundreds of feral cats that he lived with). Large vertical buildings to your left make one's heart skip just thinking about what lies behind the ramparts. I'm greeted by the owner Xavier, with a smile as warm as his hug. We have been friends for several years through mutual clients and colleagues. His vision for the facility has stayed true to form, even through all the expansions over a five-year period.

"The first time I visited the property, I thought it was a junkyard. Really worn down," said Xavier on a warm, calm Saturday morning. "I had a hangar at the airport at that time and was looking for some more space to store cars. I really didn't know what to expect when I found a for sale sign on the door. One thing led to another, and a year later I was moving in. What you see now is a total transformation for the better and future of this property with its rich California history."

Once inside, I found a room full of vintage Airstream trailers, and Xavier remarks something about how he likes to camp in style. Vaulted ceilings and exposed redwood roof beams give the room a towering feel, while the unrestored maple wood floors are nostalgic and something to drool over. Now it's time to travel downstairs,



where hundreds of farm workers once washed and packed freshly-picked lemons, grapefruits and oranges. Although it was near 90 degrees outside, down in the lower level it was at least 20 clicks cooler. My eyes adjusted just before seeing rows of new roll-up garage doors, stowing around 400 collector cars. I'll take door number 3, Monty!

One car I received all-access to was the strangely inviting 1964 Ford pickup truck, named the BW-SS-1. What in the world is this thing? Well, the truck was originally owned by the Brucker brothers, Danny and Jim, who owned Movieworld, a Cars of the Stars Museum in Buena Park, California. It was there that Von Dutch also worked, quietly and under an alias. The Brucker boys also owned our subject property and decided this truck was perfect for hauling and tromping around in, but after a near fatal accident, the truck was nearly destroyed. Von Dutch had taken a liking to the rig and asked the guys if he could work on it and get it back running. In a matter of days, the truck had a complete makeover with a chopped top, custom fenders and rolled body panels, a cut-down windscreen, new front end with wider mesh grille, custom hood inserts and many other subtle details all over the truck.

But what does the BW-SS-1 stand for? The Santa Paula ranch was riddled with bats so Von Dutch affectionately called it 'Bat World,' and as a tribute, the truck became the Bat-World-Sirloin-Sabre-1. It was used as it was intended for years, with the occasional story of Dutch utilizing it to scare off visitors with a rifle in the passenger seat. But with use came problems and the truck was parked on a remote area of the property. It sat for 30 years before changing hands and landing back where the truck was born, decades before.

"The property was built in 1927 then expanded in 1935. Roy Wilson, who was a famous architect in Los Angeles specialized in industrial buildings and packing houses. He was just brilliant and concerned about keeping the produce cool in the summer months and warm enough in the winter," Xavier beamed with enthusiasm

and knowledge. "Everything is north-facing and stays about 70-75 degrees, no matter the time of year. It was the largest packing plant in California for a long time. How fantastic is that?!"

I'm told most stalls packed a wide variety of blue chip collector cars and trucks for enthusiasts locally and around the world. I always play on the side of privacy and discretion, so I never pushed Xavier to see what might lie in each vault. What I can assure you is that these cars are living the best life. A turnkey facility with the ability to service each car, keep batteries fresh, fuel systems checked and exteriors perfect all year round. An owner has the option to pick up and drop off with proper lead time and drive right into some of the best backroads





California has to offer. Just under five miles from the front gate is Hwy. 150 North to Ojai, California – one of the best kept wine towns on all the West Coast. A 40-mile drive, there and back, on perfectly repaved roads in and out of the lush valleys is the ideal exercise needed for your Ferrari 250 California Spyder or Mercedes 300SL.

“We value safety, privacy and proper storage for a long term deep sleep, not a nap. We don’t do a lot of promotion, but rather private open houses, rally stops and word of mouth - so it has grown more organically by design.”

But what about Dutch? Son to a very talented Los

Angeles-based sign painter and gold leaf expert, Howard was always drawing and painting while picking up tricks from his father. During depression times, he learned people would pay \$1 to customize a car in ten minutes. Five cars equaled \$5 to him, which only further fueled his passions. One car drove up and asked if he could cover some of the lacquer paint cracks that were ruining his hood. He painted one swoop, then another on the other side to match. More details, dots and thinly-colored lines followed before he had both covered the cracks and created a one-off look. Now more people wanted his creative eye and touch on their cars and motorcycles – a style was born.

Dutch was friends with Dean Jefferies, Ed ‘Big Daddy’ Roth, George Barris and confided with Steve McQueen – always living on the edge of poverty and reality. He was brash, unkempt at times and lived his final days on the property, drunk inside his custom Long Beach City bus.

The current scene is quite the contrast to how Von Dutch lived, being strongly averse to monetary things and a cluttered hoarder. Collector Car Vault is not a reflection of what he was, but maybe flickers light on his best self. Quality craftsmanship, attention to detail and many natural details to never be replicated. Small hand painted pictures can still be found scattered across the walls, never to bury the good did that came from his hands. Now it’s in the hands of Xavier, who continues building there for the future.

“We have a lot of his tools, one of his trucks and many other mementos. His iconic Flying Eyeball design is etched in concrete all over the grounds, and kept electrical panels that were personalized by him. The office was his pinstripe studio, which puts us in the heart of Kustom Kulture every single day.”

