

THERE'S NOTHING TO FEAR BUT FEAR ITSELF

Those of us who drive a classic British sports car or indeed any car that is 30 or more years old, live in some degree of fear or apprehension that something could go wrong. If you are like most classic car aficionados you may well be closely attuned to your car's mood, characterised by the unique noises it makes under various circumstances. We know and become accustomed to the combination of sounds that represent normality and, in their absence or in the presence of something unusual, we start to panic, as might a herd of zebra as they sense the ominous presence of a hungry lioness.

In my 2011 Volvo, there are a whole host of sensors, gauges, lights and computer generated messages that continually monitor and adjust the performance of the car or tell me, for example, that the centre rear seat belt has been engaged, that the tail gate is unlatched or that the left side reversing light bulb isn't working. I read recently that the central computer in the new BMW 6-Series Coupé (650i) is fed tens of thousands of data inputs per millisecond as it continually monitors the ABS, DST, DTC, CBC, DBC, or some other three-lettered acronym, and all is displayed through heads-up (HUD) technology on to the windscreen. Clearly, car engineering has advanced amazingly in 50 years, but has at least some of the fun of driving been lost as a result? There is no longer anything left to fear – heck, the BMW will even apply the brakes if it senses it is getting too close to the car in front.

Getting back to fear itself, I was often asked if I was scared when making my first solo flight as a pilot. The answer was unequivocally no, because of the progres-

PHOTO: Chuck Goolsbee Courtesy 6-PACK 2012 Calendar

sive training and instruction in the theory and practise of flight prior to the Chief Flying Instructor signing off my log book for solo flight. Now, if there happened to be a strong, gusty crosswind on that particular day, then it might have been different! Even in the midst of a catastrophic event there often is no time for fear. Fear occurs when one has too much time to contemplate. This was fully brought home to me as a result of an experience in the mid-1980s when I was visiting a gold mine in Nevada. The open cast mine was being developed as two separate pits and together with a colleague, I was being given a tour of the "west pit" as, according to our engineer guide, a blast was being planned for the "east pit." Well, our guide got his compass points mixed up and without warning the entire bench on which we were standing was blasted onto a lower level where we had been standing only minutes before. Fortunately, we were examining gold mineralization on the back wall of the bench at the time of the explosion and so were spared being blown into oblivion, however, a significant part of any explosion goes

upwards and backwards and I can clearly recall standing there watching rocks and boulders, some the size of a small car, coming my way, all as if in slow motion. My feet never moved but my body seemed to sway from side to side in an attempt to avoid the approaching missiles. Thankfully, we all survived without injury but a few hours later on the way to Reno, my colleague pulled our rented Land Cruiser over at the side of the road and we were violently sick – the fear and shock had finally hit home after too much thought and discussion!

The point is that if one understands the risks and the processes involved then the chance of something "happening" out of the blue is minimised and fear can be relegated to a backseat role and actually become a component part of the adventure. The same reasoning also applies to running a classic sports car. Some of this fear may be primordial, gained, as in my own particular circumstances, by an experience the very day I collected my TR6 from its previous owner. As previously related in the Spring 2011 issue of Ragtop, my experience was a cooling system failure and

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the blowing of the cylinder head gasket after only 30 miles of motoring, leaving me stranded quite a few miles from home. I know others have recounted similar experiences and we have probably allowed this fear to affect our ability to comfortably take our classic cars on longer trips. We are psychologically tethered by this experience even though we may

have, as in my own case, virtually rebuilt our cars and know them quite intimately by this stage.

As I drive along in my Six, it is not usually the Sixties on Six on Sirius XM to which I am listening, rather I am keeping an ear (or two) tuned to catch the first abnormal sound, my hands and feet are all computing vibration or other sensory inputs for something unusual, for any indication of pending trouble. I am also regularly scanning the instrument panel, a habit derived from my flying days, to ensure that the temperature, oil pressure and alternator are in positive territory and that no warning lights are glowing. By staying attuned to our cars we can hear and interpret what they are saying to us – who therefore needs a central computer as in the BMW 650i?

Is there anything comparable to hearing and sensing that everything is running properly; the music of a well tuned exhaust note as the engine reaches its sweet spot on the power curve or the precision of a snappy gear shift or the exhaust burble as one executes a perfect down shift? As I drive, I will also be monitoring the normal groans,

thumps, sighs, clicks, rattles and bangs made by the car – these are the sounds of old age mainly experienced when crossing over the likes of recessed manhole covers, or even tar filled expansion cracks and what passes for normal road surfaces these days! All of these sounds collectively add to the enjoyment of driving, even if a mental note is being made that it really is time to replace at least some of the rubber body mounts that have probably hardened or even completely disintegrated over time leading to some unwanted sloppiness between body and frame.

As my friend and fellow Six owner, Colin Pillar, has stated on more than one occasion, the unreliability factor is part of the charm and the adventure of classic British motoring. Who needs the clinical reliability of a BMW?

During the heyday of the British car industry, the typical English car owner, if not the entire British Isles contingent, were known as automotive tinkers and tweekers (was that where the TT in the Isle of Man TT came from?) and I think that the car manufacturers presumed that to be the case and designed their cars to require constant adjustment and tuning. It was a Saturday or Sunday morning ritual, depending on one's religious upbringing, to at least hand wash and wax polish one's car. The more daring, but not necessarily more mechanically experienced, could be seen lying in their driveways or on the street under their cars while using the pavement (aka side walk) as a sort of ½-ramp to gain some ground clearance to facilitate oil changes and drive shaft/transmission lubrication. Sometimes these aficionados, depending on their Monday to Friday status, would be seen dressed in boiler suits or coveralls while the white collared folk would be out in an

old pair of cavalry twill pants and maybe a tweed jacket, perhaps even with a buttoned collar and tie plus or minus a cloth cap. Oh, the memories!

This need to tweak is a constant presence with all classic car fans no matter what our ethnic background or the marque we favour. It seems to foster a closer relationship between driver and machine. The car somehow assumes a personality and is no longer just an inanimate object. Some of us even go so far as to attribute names to our cars – Rosie (gasp)! And some of us may even speak to our cars, beyond the expletives used when a repair job isn't going exactly to plan! I can't see doing that to a Volvo or a BMW which are, after all, just a means of comfortable reliable transportation whereas our classic British sports cars are a means unto themselves, created for the pure enjoyment and sheer fun of top down driving and that sense of oneness with nature and the open road.

Franklin D. Roosevelt is credited with the quotation which prompted the title to this piece. In his inaugural presidential address of 1933 he states, "So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself - nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance." In the spirit of Roosevelt, I plan to make 2012 the year in which I strike out on longer trips in my Six, cutting that psychological umbilical cord that has been restraining us to a 100 mile radius of home base, but like Linus van Pelt from Charles Schulz's comic strip Peanuts, I'm not planning, just yet, to dispose of my security blanket. I'll insist that Colin motors along side in his Six.

Oh, and let's not be too unkind to BMW – they do after all own the Triumph brand and one day may very well bring us a TR9. **RAGTOP**