

Pandora's Box

Once upon a time, race cars had odd and bewitching names like "Babs," "Moby Dick," "Bluebird," "Ol' Hound," "Calhoun," "Big Bertha," "Poison Lil," and my favorite, "Mephistophcles." Just goofing off, you could fill up a whole column of them.

And behind every name, there was a cool tale. Here are two.

"Pandora" was John Cobb's piece. Big bad John was the Brit with the fortune from furs and obsession for speed who in 1947 set the Land Speed Record at almost 400 mph. In 1952 he tried making himself the fastest man on water as well as land but instead had his speedboat go to the bottom of a body of water in Scotland that is supposedly home to the Loch Ness monster. In 1963, he finally lost the LSR he'd held posthumously for 16 years to the tricycle of cowboy jet jockey Craig Breedlove.

Pandora wasn't Cobb's LSR streamliner. She was the open-wheel and heavy-gauge mastodon John kept handy whenever his tastes ran to going the roundy-round route and climbing up on the looming walls of Montlhery on the continent or closer to London at Brooklands.

As long as Cobb applied no more than a quarter of her throttle, all was well; Pandora behaved herself. More throttle than that hugely complicated matters – Pandora's V-12 airplane engine would take over and make Pandora impossible to keep on the ground,

She set the Brooklands lap record, twice won the Brooklands 500, broke the world's one-hour record and never once maimed big John. Finally getting out of the speed service, Pandora for a time did duty testing parachutes.

Her name derives from a 1951 fruitcake of a movie called "Pandora and the Flying Dutchman." Occasionally you can still catch it on late-night TV. Pandora is almost as great-looking as her co-star, Ava Gardner. Ava at that time in her "private" life was just walking out on Frank Sinatra – and you will well understand why ol' Blue Eyes got his heart broken to bits. Pandora hurtles along a cliff road to the top of a mountain, gets dropped into the sea and fished out, and while establishing a desert speed record catches fire.

Pandora lasted for 21 years. The "Jewel Box" did a stint of 23.

The Jewel Box was conceived by Ted Horn (1910-1948), who was a chauffeur for the ages; maybe somebody from the next century will at last match his three consecutive Indy car seasonal titles and the nine Indy 500s in a row when he never finished worse than fourth. In 1939, requiring a bread-and-butter tool for earning sprint car money on flat tracks, banked tracks and mile tracks. Ted ordered such a tool. But somehow builder Harry "No Hammers" Lewis misunderstood bread-and-butter for beautiful. Everything from the sweep of the elegant aluminum hood to the recessed windshield and fuss-budget dashboard, to the intricate steering system (a mini-duplicate of those found on Harry A. Miller's straight-eight Indy and board track marvels) made the Jewel Box, well, the Jewel Box.

And then Horn himself went to work doing things to the Jewel Box's 220 Offenhauser that might have made the Meyer-Drake people flip out. He rebalanced the crank. He created his own intake manifold. Fuel Injection was as yet unknown, and Horn didn't much like Winfield carbs, so he modified up some trick Rileys. He used a tuned exhaust, blended his own racing fuel and employed 16 different

gear ratios. Finally, in a damn-the-costs-lets-be-lightweight move, Horn made up his own tricked, fragile magnesium pistons. Good for no more than five races, max, they nonetheless weighed a third of what regular ones did and permitted Horn to haul revs of 7,000 in a period when anything above 5,500 was considered pushing it.

The Jewel Box dug Ted and vice versa. In three seasons they set 62 track records, won 21 features and took six seconds. In 1948, they were in the process of running up a famous string of 23 wins out of 24 starts until Ted interrupted things to go Indy car racing and went out to the meet at Du Quoin, Ill., he never returned from. As if remaining in a state of perpetual mourning for Ted, the Jewel Box regularly and royally dumped on the seven different owners and who-knows-how-many different drivers who campaigned the car over the following 14 seasons.

They never should have left it out on the dirt tracks that long. All its old concourse d'elegance potential got pounded off layer by layer. By 1961 it had turned into a hulking Cadillac-powered terror that some Jackson Pollack had spray-painted fire truck red – axles, wire wheels, tire sidewalls, the works. Campaigning on New York's Lebanon Valley high-banks, the flabby Caddy mill overpowered the all-guts-and-no-brains bomber at the controls, who, aged 21 was actually a year younger than the Jewel Box. "A slide for life on every lap," recalled said bomber, Mario Andretti, decades afterward.

Somebody else – not Mario – dumped the Jewel Box on its back not long afterward, and, mercifully, that was the end of its racing. (1999)

