

Dr Sprocket's Column

A FINE LINE, PART TWO: ED ROTH



Much has been written about Ed Roth and his contributions to the 'kustom kulture', as it's been labelled by more recent admirers of that era's custom artists and builders. Ed's motorcycle phase only lasted about five years, but he never stopped constructing trikes.

Ed's involvement with custom cars lasted longer; about ten years. His

artistic talent revealed itself when Ed was at high school; after he graduated he joined the air force, then after being discharged he started pinstriping cars.

Around 1958, he teamed up with the Baron and his grandson Tom Kelly to start a shop called the 'Crazy Painters' on Atlantic Blvd. in Lynwood, Los Angeles. Ed opened his own shop the following year on Slauson in Maywood, calling it 'Roth Studios'.

Early on, Ed realised that to succeed in this new art form of custom paint and modified cars he needed to develop products that could be mass-marketed. He was one of the first to understand this – and that there was money to be made doing it.

Kenny Howard made one of the first crazy shirts with a weird character on it around 1955. Ed produced his own once Roth Studios opened; he started one of the first mail order set-ups and young kids all over America now had access to his shirts, which were in great demand. When he closed his shop ten years later, at the end of the sixties, he'd made a fortune from the thousands of shirts he'd produced.

In the early '60s he constructed one of the first of many fibreglass-bodied

hot rod/custom cars; The Outlaw, followed by The Beatnik, captured adolescent imaginations everywhere. Revell model company was quick to see the potential and signed Roth to a very lucrative contract. More money flowed into the coffers.

Then around 1965, Ed decided the custom car craze had about run its course and he hung a 180, turning his back on it and immersing himself in the custom motorcycle culture. He brought Ed 'Newt' Newton on board to do artwork and oversee shirt production; around this time, Roth Studios started silk-screening the shirts to keep up with demand.

Ed also employed Don 'Monté' Monteverde, a young Indian bob-job-riding local artist and pinstriper who would develop the Rat Fink character (though Ed copyrighted it 'Roth Studios'). Next on staff was ex-motorcycle rider Robert Williams – only 22 and showing great artistic promise – brought in as art director to do Ed's magazine ads.

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