

Cars That Matter Ep 06 – Conversations with Carroll Shelby

- Transcript

Announcer: From Curtco Media, this is Cars that Matter.

Carroll Shelby: All I know is the thing that I'm so terribly proud of that we took some hot rodders from Japan, Australia, France, Spain, England, Germany. And went over and beat the best in the world. And there have been a hundred companies come to me, I want to make a movie of it. And until the movie's made the way I want to make it, giving them the credit, I'm not gonna make the movie.

Robert Ross: That was the voice of Carroll Shelby, automotive designer, innovator, racer, entrepreneur, philanthropist and owner of about a million other descriptors that could be accurately applied. That clip is from a conversation Carroll Shelby and I had in 2010 where he discussed the possibility of making a movie about his life and his impact on racing history and the stolen victory of his friend and collaborator, Ken Miles at the 24 hour Le Mans in 1966. Carroll Shelby unfortunately passed away in 2012, but a story was made into a movie in 2019. Ford versus Ferrari a 20th Century Fox Film directed by James Mangold and starring Christian Bale and Matt Damon. And while the film is honorific to the people and events surrounding that historic race, I couldn't help but think about the Carroll Shelby I knew, the man that I was honored to call a friend. This is Robert Ross with Cars that Matter. And today I'm going to share two previously unheard conversations that I had with Carroll Shelby, one from 2002 and the other from 2010. But before we dive deep into car talk, I wanted to take a moment to introduce you. But where would I even start, with his racing victories at Le Mans, with his revolutionary development work for Ford, or maybe with his foundation dedicated to children in need of organ donations? No, I want to introduce you to the person.

Carroll Shelby: Chile is a state of mind. I'm able to make chile one way and the next day I may want to make it some other way. And that's a beautiful thing about Chile. You can make it chile verde, like they make it in New Mexico all red like. They think that it has to be in Texas, but there's so many different variations. Cincinnati, you know, they don't eat chile without putting it over spaghetti. And there's more chili eaten in Cincinnati, Ohio, than any place in the world per capita. You know that.

Robert Ross: No. Where else can I get this kind of information but talking to you?

Robert Ross: Carroll Shelby was a hoot to talk to about anything. He had lived through so many adventures and taken so many chances that all you had to do was push a button and he could talk for hours. And of course, things he learned in one field would always lead to life lessons in another. His passion for chile brings to mind a likely apocryphal quote attributed to him that applies to life as well as his famous recipe. If a guy tells you you have to put gila monster meat in your chili, you don't argue with him. You just don't eat with him. So why did he live life so unabashedly?

Carroll Shelby: Well, it was more fun to try and to fail than it was not to try it. You always learn something out of every failure that you get into.

Robert Ross: .To introduce Carroll Shelby is a Herculean task, because what he did was achieve Herculean results with the most modest resources. Shelby was one of the greats who defined the golden era of racing. He was a self-taught guy. He was a Texas chicken farmer. He took his little MG to the racetrack and won some races. And next thing you know, he's in the big league. Dander to Shelby would be to say, here's a guy that went up against the greatest race car maker, probably narcissist of the era. Enzo Ferrari. And considering that Shelby was able to outclass him and his other competitors with a team of passionate gearheads working for as he says, a pittance was remarkable. But Carroll was a complicated and controversial guy. He probably made as many enemies as he made friends. They'd sue anybody making a fake Cobra. And he told lots of stories, some of them true. But above all, he was more humble than one would imagine. And it wasn't false modesty.

Carroll Shelby: See, with a heart transplant, a kidney transplant, some mornings I feel like getting up. Some mornings I don't. Be 80 my next birthday. I'm the most fortunate person in the world because I'm not supposed to be here. The doctors told me in 1960 that I'd be lucky to have five years. And as big fingered Jack says, they did my first bypass, last All-American from Yale, he says Shelby, Every five years, they find another pill or another operation to keep you alive. I don't know whether the world's better off or not for this.

Robert Ross: His genuine and empathetic regard for the people who work together to make the Shelby name great set him apart. And Shelby worked with the best. Guys like Phil Remington, who was a genius, and Einstein of the automotive world. Guys like Ken Miles, who was as irascible as he was talented a driver and kind of a bootstrap engineer into the bargain. Guys like Chuck Cantwell, who went on to perfect the Shelby Mustangs. Pete Brock, who was a great designer and created the look and feel of the Daytona Coupe and even the stripes and logos of the Shelby G.T. 350. These were the men under Shelby's command that Ford trusted to revitalize their racing program. These men working together, in a cramped little shop in Venice, were tasked to bring about a singular goal, beat Ferrari at any cost. And they grabbed that bull by the horns and held on tight. Eventually they moved to LAX- L.A. International Airport, rented some hangers on the back side of Imperial Highway, and they rolled up their sleeves and set to work. And brilliantly after a disappointing season in 1965, they went on to decimate Ferrari in 1966. The Daytona 24 hour race set the stage with Ken Miles winning in the G.T. 40 Mark II and at what is perhaps still the most talked about race finish in history, the twenty four hour of Le Mans, Ford took first, second and third place in 1966 with a trio of G.T. forty's unheard of. It's an underdog story of men working together, problem solving, strategizing and achieving the impossible, even if the true winner would never be acknowledged by the race. But we'll get to that. What I'm trying to say is that by the time I met Carroll Shelby, the man was already a legend. So one day my friend Jeff Pearlman calls me and says, Hey, I've got a guy with me. Carroll Shelby, if you want to meet him, you can do an interview, too. Well, of course, with about 30 minutes notice, I cobbled together some questions, grabbed a recorder, and we had a conversation in June of 2002.

Robert Ross: Mr. Shelby, you pitched the idea for the Cobra to Ford and AC. But am I correct? Ford came to you about racing the Mustang. What do they propose?

Carroll Shelby: Yes, it wasn't so much the racing that they proposed. The Mustang was first developed by Don Frye and the people at Ford. It was built with a six cylinder engine, a three, three speed transmission, and it was more or less a secretary's car. Said, We're going to deliver this car for twenty three ninety five. It became an immediate hit with the secretaries, and Lee Iacocca wanted more than that. He wanted to have a performance version of it. So the people at Ford went to the Sports Car Club of America and says, we're going to make a sport car out of the Mustang. Talking to John Bishop at

Sport Car Club of America. And he said, what do you intend to do? He says, We just wanted to be considered a sport car. So I said, well, no, it's not a sport car. There's a lot of things would have to be done to it. Anyway, they came back and talked to Lee. He picked up the phone and said, Shelby, I want you to make a performance car out of the Mustang. And really, I didn't want to do it because we were tied up with five different racing programs. The building of the Cobras moving into a new facility. And I really had my hands full because I was in over my head. But Ray Getty's, who was actually a Ford employee but was assigned to coordinate everything between Shelby American and Ford, says nope we got to do this if Iacocca wants it done. He says we're gonna have to do it. So I said, okay. So I said we'd better put a budget together. Well. There was no money to speak of. So they decided that fifteen hundred dollar budget was going to reduce this prototype of the G.T. 350.

Robert Ross: Fifteen hundred dollars?.

Carroll Shelby: Yeah.

Robert Ross: Amazing.

Carroll Shelby: I went back to the Sport Car Club of America. John. Big John. I'm gonna make this thing a sport car. I've been told to tell me what I gotta do. He says, Well, I'm glad you approached me like that. But instead of just telling me that you were going to make it a sport car, let's take the rear seat out, put some larger brakes on the front, put 300 or more horsepower in it. Good close ratio transmission, improve the brakes, improve the stiffness suspension and make it a sport car. Well, sure enough, it took us about 60 days to do that. And we wound up with a car that won the national championship in its production class for six or seven years. The first year we built five hundred I think the next year, seventeen hundred. Then the next year, 5000. So that's the way it began. And then the Mustang got too heavy and too big, so it went away.

Robert Ross: You worked primarily with Ford's parts for the car initially, to keep the cost down

Carroll Shelby: It was all Ford.. What we did was worked with the assembly plant at Milpitas in California, and they deleted the hood. The deck cleared the trunk. All the

parts we wanted deleted they took off at the assembly plant. Then we built pieces out of fiberglass and fabricated different parts for the engine to hop the engine up. Ford loaned us a couple of real young designers who worked full time at our place in California. And we would change the shape of this, the shape of that so that it had a distinct look. Actually, I really got into it and had a lot of fun doing it. It was something that I didn't know anything about doing because I was a sport car guy and I wanted to build my own sport car to beat the Corvette. And then we had just gone in to trying to take on Ferrari at the time. So I tell people trying to make a mule, outrun a racehorse,.

Robert Ross: Essentially a Ford Fairlane I guess that turned into a sports car.

Carroll Shelby: Yeah, it was a Falcon Falcon, Ford Falcon, which the Fairlane came off of it. The Mustang came off of it. Don Frey, far as I'm concerned, was a genius at what he was doing there at Ford.

Robert Ross: I guess the first Shelby's were essentially competition models. And then, of course, they were street models.

Carroll Shelby: Yes, you're absolutely right. The first ones were street legal racers. And that's what we thought that it would take to establish the reputation of the car. We stripped everything off of it, air conditioning, radios and all of that stuff, and built the first ones as race cars and went out and beat the Corvettes on the racetrack. And then we gradually started adding things to them. By 1970, the car had power windows, air conditioning. It weighed about a thousand pounds more than the original.

Robert Ross: Now, was this a Ford idea or was this a Carroll Shelby idea?

Carroll Shelby: Actually, I quit building them myself. Shelby American did in 68 because I saw the emissions safety coming along. And for a little company to try to do all that and still bill performance cars, as you know, performance went away in America in the 70s. BMW was brilliant about it. They took a little four cylinder 202, claimed it was a sports sedan and they took the performance business away from America, which with a car that didn't perform any better than some of the things we had. But they really were brilliant in their merchandising. I think that's probably what got BMW off the ground in

this country because they took advantage of this instead of just building anything performance wise as we did in the 70s.

Robert Ross: 2002 was for you one the most pivotal European cars of the period?

Carroll Shelby: I think so, because they took a little four cylinder Sudan and turned it into the first pocket rocket. They made it the sport car and we forgot about this and we gave them that toehold. And they've been brilliant ever since.

Robert Ross: I'm sure everybody asks you this, Mr. Shelby, but do you have a favorite Shelby Mustang or favorite model? There a favorite one of those?

Carroll Shelby: You know, I hated this 68 when we did it. But, you know, I love the 68 convertible now. The 65, I guess as I've gotten older rides too rough. The 66 is fun to drive down the street, but some way you let a top down on that 68 convertible, I enjoy driving it around. I don't get on a race track anymore. I'd probably say 65 is my favorite, but 68, I guess I would say that's the one I enjoy driving around the most.

Robert Ross: Now, who pick the colors for all those? Was that a part of your deal with the marketing and all that?

Carroll Shelby: You know, I never get into what something should look like except on the Ford 27 Cobra and the Daytona coupe. I had something to do with that. Pete brought the first drawing's owner on the Daytona Coupe. And I would go and look at the things that we were doing. We had these designers that Ford assigned to us and then we had the kids from the art center that helped a lot. But I don't get into designs on own everything that I build because I saw the people that run these big motor companies. I've worked with all three of them and when I see the chairman and the president go down the design studio and try to tell a person that's trained in that particular business. Take this off. And they had that. And they don't know shit about it, really. And it's all a matter of opinion. So I kind of let these guys do it, that they're trained to do it. They know what flows and what doesn't.

Robert Ross: Sounds like working for you would be a real dream. Every designer's dream then.

Carroll Shelby: Well, that's what Bob Lutz is trying to bring out of General Motors, I think. I've always admired what the bunch of guys at Tom Gale put together at Chrysler. I've admired what Don DeLaRossa did at Ford and then later at Chrysler. I thought they were kind of atrocious. But I've grown to love what Harley Earl let his guys do at General Motors with those tail fins

Robert Ross: Obviously, you've had a stint with all the big three, did your Chrysler deal in the 80's and.

Carroll Shelby: I've worked with all of them. They're a pain in the ass in a lot of ways but you can't build a car, especially today, without working with them. It's the politics that get in the way of what you're trying to accomplish, because naturally those people, an outsider like me, goes in to try to get something done. Well, they get very jealous because this is their livelihood and they don't want to see an outsider come in there and tell them what to do. So I've always tried to politically kind of keep an even balance, stay out of the politics as much as I can. But you really can't. It's a double edged sword you got to have them and a lot of times they get in your way so bad that, like they say, the camel was a beautiful Arabian horse designed by committee. That's about the way it works around those things a lot of the time. There's, I've run into a few people at those places, though, that are real entrepreneurs and real renegades. And I admire them greatly for going against the tide.

Robert Ross: Certainly historically, guys like DeLorean even trying to sell his car, which was.

Carroll Shelby: Yeah, it's kind of it's kind of like trying to push it uphill. Yeah.

Robert Ross: We talked about politics. We can talk about your latest venture, automotively, which is a Series One. Was the Olds engine a political decision or a motor that you...

Carroll Shelby: No, the way that thing started was John Rock was a friend of mine, and John Rock was in charge of that Oldsmobile division. I went to John and we sat down for a year or two, and I said, John, I'm 70 years old, over 70. But I think that

there's a niche out here that's not being handled. That North Star engine is a hell of an engine, the best engine built in America today. You think we might build a sport car? And he and I sat down and put a deal together to get it going. And I put up some of my money and he arranged for the Oldsmobile dealers to become involved. And it was coming along just fine. And then this guy's Zarella comes on board. He didn't appreciate a cowboy like John Rock who knew how to motivate people, knew what he wanted to get done, told him where he wanted them to go, and he got out of the way and let them do it. Well, this guy came in with his brand management thing. And the first thing, you know, I had people in the thing that didn't know one end of a car from the other, two or three of them were fairly decent people, but it became a nightmare. In five years, now, I've finally gotten the car that I can say I'm really proud of it. It's not the most finessed car in the world. But now the Oldsmobile engine with the supercharger. There's nothing. An old man like me went out and did a three point seven in a quarter of a mile. I did one hundred and twenty eight in a quarter. There's nothing that touches that. Not the latest Ferrari. And they built some damn good cars, by the way. There's a lot of good sport cars out there. But the Series One, I'm happy with it now, but it's taken five years and we had to do it ourselves. We didn't really get any help from Oldsmobile to speak after John Rock left. I've always been very disappointed in that.

Robert Ross: But do you feel that you finally achieved a car that you can put your signature on?

Carroll Shelby: It's taken us five years, though, and we've had to go out and do it ourself. And I had to sell 75 percent of the company and bring a partner in, Venture Industries to get it done, because it just wasn't getting done the other way.

Robert Ross: So it wasn't like working with Ford back in the 60s. The companies changed. You think working with the Big Three's changed over that?

Carroll Shelby: Not really. You always run the problem when you work with those people. You have, always have a working relationship with somebody in the company that you are in tune with, and they want to get the same thing done that you do and they run interference for you and take care of it like Iacocca did with me at Ford. Then Bunkie Knutson comes in and actually he hated me because I built the Cobras, and I teased him all the time about the fact that General Motors had had so much to do with

Chapparral. I says, why don't you all admit that you're building and I'm helping Jim Hall? Well. When he came over to Ford, there came the bosses, there came, all the stuff to try to put me out of business. I just laughed because I'd had all of it I wanted anyway. And I went off to Africa for 12 years. I spent nine months a year in Africa, and I'd always wanted to do that anyway. But what happens at those big companies? You have somebody that knows automobiles that you can deal with and knows what your goals are and helps you. And you call up some Monday morning and need, ask to talk to him, say, well, oh, he's sales manager in Italy now. He left Saturday to go to Italy. He's a sales manager, or to do the things that I like to do, you always have to deal with kind of renegades inside those companies. And a lot of times those people get themselves into political trouble. Like Lutz, probably should have been chairman of Chrysler, he's a real automobile guy, but he's very vocal about what he thinks. And sometimes that might get you in trouble. I think that he's admitted that's done to him. Like my mouth got me in trouble, a lot of times. And that's what happened at Ford when Bunkie came in and brought his people in. Thank God he only lasted a year or you'd probably run the company. He was going against the grain of everything that the people at Ford were trying to accomplish. Those guys come on and boy, they're just like a German shepherd, got piss in the corner so you know they were there and they tried to change the whole philosophy of a company that's been around 50, 70 years. And they don't realize that that company is gonna be there with or without them. Very few people make a difference. But there are people that make a difference as you go back in the automobile industry or any industry. But you get too many of those people that it's a short term thing with them. And they, a lot of times they hurt things more than they help. That's that's what they found out, I guess, at Ford with Bunkie.

Robert Ross: Well, certainly your contributions have made a stellar difference to the history of the automobile, postwar. I mean, there are a few names that stand out and yours is absolutely at the top of the list. Think of yourself, Enzo Ferrari, Colin Chapman. I mean, this is a pretty heady crew, so.

Carroll Shelby: Yeah. Well, you know, I knew all those people pretty darn well. I spent the whole summer of 55 with Dino Ferrari when I was buying all those cars for Tony Parravano over there and driving in Europe. And I knew Colin very well from the very start. And I was very fortunate to come along in that era and know these people. And hell, I didn't know at the time. They call it the golden era. Boy, it never gets easy. It

wasn't easy then. It's not easy now. So you just get up every morning and do the best you can. I don't worry. Anybody that thinks they're so they might call me a legend. The other day I said anybody thinks they are isn't. And Mr. Ferrari never thought he was a legend. He was just a hardheaded old guy that knew what he wanted to build and loved his race cars and didn't want to build street cars. If it hadn't been for Luigi Canetti he would have never built any, I guess.

Robert Ross: That's right.

Carroll Shelby: Colin didn't want to build street cars, but he was forced into it because you'd have to have the income back then you couldn't make your living just off race cars. It was different than it is today.

Robert Ross: Back in the late 60s, you know, before the hammer came down on American performance, you mentioned you were involved in a lot of programs. You see five different racing programs. I know just as an observer, the Cobra and the Mustang programs were both running concurrently, at least up through, what, '67 or so. Were you more involved in one than the other or was it just a juggling act? How'd it work? How do you keep a handle on all that stuff?

Carroll Shelby: Hey, the truth. I didn't. I just had a bunch of wonderful people that did it all. I think that Shelby American in the '60s had the, we had more people that worked until they fell, hundreds of them literally, toward the end of it. I moved from Texas to California because this is where the hot rodders were and we wound up with hot rodders from New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Switzerland, Belgium, England. We had most of the hot rodders in the world that dreamed of doing things like this working for us. And we had the COBRA program, a racing program going. We had the development of the Daytona Coupe going. We had all the production of all those cars. I had four different racing programs going at the time and by the time we got into the Mustangs that added two more racing programs. And then Ford came along and says, when our GT40 didn't do very well in '65, they turned the thing over to us in California. Henry Ford said after the fiasco in '65, he called Don Frey and Leo Beeby and I and says, well, you boys, here's your name tag. And it said, Ford wins LeMans in '66. And. Well, after we got over having a heart attack, we walked back down the hall and think it was Don Frey that said, Hey, Mister Ford didn't say anything about our fiscal responsibilities.

So we walked back in and he asked him and Mr. Ford said, you boys would like a job next June, wouldn't you? Course he was embarrassed for the simple reason that he had a new wife and he had a wonderful fifteen, sixteen year old son that was very interested in cars at that age. And it was embarrassing. Ford had built us the engines in a headbolt stretch. And all the cars blew up in about four hours. The drivers were disgusted. Everybody was getting disgusted with the program.

Robert Ross: And those were the 289's?.

Carroll Shelby: Yeah. Boy, when Mr. Ford got in this, there'll never be another Henry Ford for the simple reason that just nobody will ever have that clout again. He ran the company. We spent the equivalent probably of a billion dollars in today's dollars on the program in 66. And then again in 67. And we won it.

Robert Ross: And I guess the most amazing LeMans finishing in history, though, really.

Carroll Shelby: Well it's very controversial. We shouldn't have done it. Cause Ken Miles won the race and he honestly led the race by a lap and a half and we all sat down. I was a part of it as well. We beat the Ferrari's. Now let's have the three of them go across the finish line together. Well, the French made up some kind of rule that whoever started the further step, the line, they had to save face some way. But I'll always feel bad because we lost Ken that year. Testing the car for '67 and it broke in two on him at Riverside. And that would have been the only time in history that a driver won Daytona 24 hours, Sebring and LeMans. He had won the other two. And I've always felt very guilty about that. Stupid decision, not a day goes by that I don't think of Ken Miles and what he meant to us. Course there were a lot of other people involved that gave so much, Phil Rivington, Carol Smith. But Miles was an amazing human being.

Robert Ross: You see in an effort for Ford to get a photograph of all three cars winning at LeMans they asked Ken Miles to slow down. They asked Ken, who had just set another LeMans lap record to surrender his enormous lead. And by putting three cars neck and neck, officials at LeMans determined that the car that started furthest behind the starting line had actually driven the furthest and knocked Ken Miles out of first place, denying him not only the victory, but the possibility of becoming the first man to win Daytona Sebring and LeMans in a single year. Sadly, Ken Miles died while testing a

new GT40 in August of that same year, age 47. After my interview with Shelby in 2002, we went out to lunch. He talked about future projects and what he was going to build and what he was doing, electric Cobras. It was an amazing opportunity to spend about three hours getting to know one another and we became friends and we keep in touch over the years. In 2010, I recorded another conversation. But before we get there, let's take a quick break.

Promo Vices: Hi, this is Chris and Jenny for one last day. We were just talking about how the holidays are over and we're a little bit bummed. But you know what? I think we can keep the holidays going. How? By buying gifts for ourselves. OK. I like where you're thinking. If you go to Vicesreserve.com and you use the code `podcastVIP`, you get a fifteen percent off everything in the store. So it's like Vices is still giving us Christmas presents. That's amazing. `PodcastVIP Vicesreserve.com`, 15 percent off everything. What are we waiting for? Well, let's go. Let's go. Vicesreserve.com. I'm going.

Promo HU: Sometimes the exceptional is not the biggest budget. Sometimes the exceptional is someone's ability to actually take their soul and print it on the screen for a moment. I want to learn everything that there is to know about the filmmaking process. I think part of art is hearing from the artists who create it and the number of different visions, the number of different qualifications that have to go into making any film is insurmountable. And hearing those stories can be just as exciting and insightful as the movies themselves. Certain movies or certain scores, certain actors have shaped who I am as a person. I have such appreciation for the things that people produce and the work that goes into , whether it's the writer who came up with this story in general, or how the filmmakers were able to take that from the page and put it onto screen and then from the actors themselves who are able to kind of bring that all to life. All of it is what I want to hear, because it makes me love my favorite movies even more. I'm Scott Tallal. If you love movies like I do you're going to love Hollywood UNSCRIPTED. Wherever you get your podcasts.

Robert Ross: Welcome back. Let's move a little forward in time, 2010, to be exact. Carroll Shelby was the guest of honor at the Quail Motorsports Gathering, where his legacy in his cars, Cobras and Mustangs especially, were being celebrated. I walked into this room and there was a signature black cowboy hat on the table right out of central casting. The room was full of people, sycophants mostly, and his wife, Cleo. He

had very graciously agreed to meet me at a certain time. So he sees me walk in and says hey Robert, OK. I'm gonna do an interview with this young man. I said, I'm going to do an interview. All you get out of here. That's it. Get out of here. You too, Cleo. I was pretty taken aback. But before you know it, it's just me and Shelby. And so we started a conversation.

Robert Ross: Well, I thought we'd talk about some of the history and talk about what you're doing now to hear it.

Carroll Shelby: Let me tell you what is really happening. The industry is changing completely. I have never made any money building cars. You make money off of things that happen because you build cars, because there's no way that I can go out there and compete against Ford or anybody else as far as just building cars, because most of our business is taking something that's already built, that's got a profit built in it by them and modified. There's not any you know, you price yourself out of the market. And when you're talking about just things like Mustangs and Camaras and things like that. So you make your money off parts. I have a lady named Tracy Smith who is just wonderful at running the licensing company, but it's absolutely amazing how many different things come in every week that they want to put your name on. Well, that's the things that you end up making a living if you make a living out of this racket, there is no get rich quick thing.

Robert Ross: Well, whether or not those classic years of the 60s when you were building cars and racing was a profitable enterprise is probably something that will remain your business. But for the rest of the world, it was certainly the most exciting of times. And.

Carroll Shelby: Well, it was, yeah.

Robert Ross: I mean, the so-called Shelby years were 1962 to 1969. That's when you and your team were able to develop cars and win races. The biggest companies couldn't develop the cars and couldn't win.

Carroll Shelby: Well, what our little company can do is take a concept and be producing it in three or four months where it takes the companies a couple years to put

something together with the time that they have so much money in it that it has to be a success, which creates a situation where they get scared to do anything that's a little radical. And they all, we, you know, we can be in and out of it even if it doesn't work in six months. So that's the advantage of our little deal in being in partnership with Ford.

Robert Ross: When the Mustang came out in 1964 and you had a look at it, I remember you calling it a secretary's car. Essentially, you transformed what was a face lifted Falcon with hardly any time and hardly any money into an SCCA champion in a period of months. Did you ever think that that car would turn out to be probably the most iconic and collectible American sports car from the 60s?

Carroll Shelby: I never dreamed that it would be, and I never realized that it not only would be that, but the 1965 model, you know, you needed to keep preparation H in a right seat, you know, because. And that turns out to be the most valuable one. The ones that bring the most money today are those that I thought, well, we've got to develop this car so it rides a little better. And this and that. And yet the old rough ride in '65 brings more money than the smooth ride in '66. So-called smooth ride move, but it doesn't ride so smooth either. But the way that thing came about was a bunch of the guys at Ford and the racing department then in what I call the golden years of performance were the 60s, as far as I'm concerned, they went back to John Bishop SCCA and says there's a goofy word called homologation which makes it, you know, regulated or makes it a production car in the eyes of the federation. If a governing body says if we want to. But they couldn't pronounce homolgotation, but they wanted him to approve what they wanted to do. And he says no. And they went back then to Iacocca and said, no, they won't do anything. That's when he called me and I'd known John for years. And what I did is I just picked up the phone. I said, John, they want me to make a sport car out of the. Now. God damn it, I can't take a crap out of you. I understand that you turn those guys down and I don't know why. But tell me what I gotta do to do it. I just have to do it. He's oh that's all that simple. Says we'll just take the backseat out and says you gotta get that engine up to 300 horsepower. He says that wouldn't be any trouble. Improve the brakes and improve the suspension and take the rear seat out. So we did those things. Chuck Cantwell did it. And I don't know if you were out there...

Robert Ross: Did I see Chuck today? Was it Chuck driving a 350R today?

Carroll Shelby: He drove it, on the deal. And he's the nicest, quietest guy. He's a really good engineer, but he's the kind of guy that just does things. And nothing flamboyant about him. He's such a wonderful guy. And I'm so glad, I made sure that this thing that they're doing up here today, that, I get the headlines and they're the people that did it. And that's what makes me, when something like this happens, I try to take the time to let the world know that nobody does anything, it's team that gets things done. And all I ever tried to do was pick the people that know how to do it. Cause I can't build a car. Hell if I put an engine together it wouldn't run.

Robert Ross: Well, you certainly had a team.

Carroll Shelby: I don't care if the world knows that. I want to find the best engine builder if I need engines built. If I want to take a Mustang and turn it into what we call a Shelby. I want to find the people that can do it. That's the reason I moved to California in 1960 because I wanted to build my own car. And the only people in America that could do it at the time were the hot rodders. It started back in the 20s, late 20s and 30s, and it started here in California. And there was a lot of guys with 20 and 30 years experience. And out of that came the best guy that I ever ran into. Phil Remington. You know, and there were a lot of Phil Remingtons. And I don't think there was anybody that could do what Phil could do. That's the reason I came out here and built three or four chassis and never could quite put the thing together. And then I went to Ed Cole says, you know, the Corvette is kind of a lead sled and I think I could do some things with it that would improve it. Would you mind me trying? He says, no, no, no. Well, what do you need? I said, I need three Corvettes, knocked down, put in a box so I can build some other parts, build another body. I said bodies, heavy fiberglass. So I took them and took them to Italy. Who's the

Robert Ross: the beautiful Scaglietti?

Carroll Shelby: Scaglietti.

Carroll Shelby: Yeah. Yeah. I took them Scaglietti and says, Hell, you're body builder. I don't know what the hell, he says. What do you think they oughta look like? I got a call from him. About a month, just when they were just beginning to get to work on them and says Shelby, you know those three Corvettes that I got for you? He said it never

happened. Forget it. He says Zorah and McKenzie have gotten to the chairman, and my ass is in trouble.

Robert Ross: Oh, brother.

Carroll Shelby: So I had to finish them. And Gary Laughlin bought one and Jim Hall, and another doctor in Houston bought another one. I sold them cause I didn't have the money to even finish them.

Robert Ross: ,And of course, that's the million dollar car today.

Carroll Shelby: Yeah it's a million dollar car today. People ask me, man those Daytona Coupes sell for 15 million dollars today, says, why did you sell them? I said, cause I needed four thousand dollars back then. And I said, besides that, when we built the Daytona Coupes and went out and won the world championship with them, used race cars then were obsolete, and not worth anything. There's a Ferrari that I drove, a 49 Ferrari. A friend of mine has in Denver probably worth 15 million dollars now. I turned down mine for thirty five hundred after, after I'd driven it in 1966 or 67. And I said I never think of what something that I had was or is worth, because I'm always thinking about what I want to do next. Well, that's what I want to build next. Rather than improve what we did in the last, whatever it was, rather than think how I missed the boat on selling something or keeping something that I should have kept from a financial standpoint, but as I said, money is never... That's always been one of my problem, making a lot of money. I'd know a lot of billionaires that have, I know I've got guys that have 100 of my cars. To me, money grubbers are not very happy people. Happy people in this world are the guys that go do what they want to do and make that their life, some way they figure out how to make a life and how to make a living out of it. And that to me is kind of the way I've always been. I've made enough money to survive, but I'll never be a wealthy man and I don't care whether I'm a wealthy man or not. It didn't make any difference to me. If I did, then I'd just go off and buy a bunch of shit I didn't need.

Robert Ross: But what's next?

Carroll Shelby: There's a great transformation going on in the automobile industry right now. This is my opinion and I'm not saying that I'm right here. You see, in 1966 and

early '67 emissions and safety became a big part of a governmental program. And a lot of people really got upset over that when it happened. But you could see why it happened, because I remember we were buying tires one time and I wanted a certain tire for the GT 350 or the Cobra, I don't remember exactly what it was. The automobile companies would fight so hard over cost that 2 and 3 cents a tire would make the difference of whether you use this tire or that tire. And safety did become a problem. And emissions were an honest problem. You know, most cars use less than 30 percent of the energy and gasoline and the rest of the crap went out the exhaust pipe and it was screwing the planet up. So something had to be done. And the most burdensome way to fix anything is let the government fix it. But it became obvious that the automobile companies, it was so competitive that they had to watch their costs to the extent that it was at the expense of safety and emissions. So I understood that. But that's the reason I went out of business and went to Africa for 12 years. I saw performance go away. Well, now it came back through electronics. Performance, came back gradually starting about 1982 and 3. They started getting a handle on electronics. And I remember I invested in a little company. Unique mobility and they had an inventor. I think his name was Turner that came up with the idea of building the AC brushless motor. And I put some money in it. We developed it. And I got to look at, you know, this is a wonderful invention. But for it to ever amount to anything, it's going to be 20 years. And I remember there was an article done in Mechanics Illustrated or Popular Mechanics. And I said, it'll be 20 years before the automobile industry picks up on this. And sure enough, it was and I'm still not sure that it's here to stay. I think it's a bridge until we get to other means of propulsion, whether it be hydrogen, electrics or what it is. But the industry itself to me is trying to feel its way on what it should do. But the old auto cycle engine is going to be here 25 and 30 years from now because they have ways of making it completely clean. They have ways. There's so many things about it that is so reliable now over a 100 years, 100 year old, 100 years of development. I don't think it's gonna go away. And our little company is going to stay in this business. Although I fiddle around, I build hydrogen Cobras and I'm working with the company that builds the Cobra bodies and chassis for us. Now they are going into electronics. So we go build electric Cobra. And we're going to build a couple of other electric cars because the storage of electricity now is beginning to pick up. Up until 10 years ago, it cost you the same thing to store electricity as it did in 1890 as far as a dollar is concerned anyway. Of course there was inflation, but dollar for dollar, the storage of electricity didn't improve over, damn near a hundred years.

Robert Ross: That's right. Are we going to see an electric Cobra that goes 0 to 100 back to zero again in 13 seconds?

Carroll Shelby: I got one

Robert Ross: Do you?

Carroll Shelby: Yeah. They built it, down at HST. I didn't build it. They build chassis for us down in Tijuana. I think they're ahead of most people electronically. But when you see people like Tesla come along and get a lot of money, when you see people like Reicher and all these people, I'm not going down that road because Toyota, Ford, General Motors, Mercedes. They've got 10000 engineers. You're not go find a guy here in the hinterlands somewhere that's smarter than all those people put together, in my opinion. I just build one office and try to pick out, once in a while, something it would be fun to build an electric Cobra that I challenge Tesla with. It would be fun, too while we're in the infancy of the electric car coming back from the 1890s, which was more popular than steam and electric, we're more popular. Yeah. At one time. So I have fun doing that. But I'm not ever gonna do it on a big scale. Not try to. Our business is going to be on autocycle building things, powerful Mustangs I'm a Mustang guy. I don't think that we can go out and build a whole bunch of different things as far as having a company is concerned. So we're going to concentrate on building one or two models of cars and being in the parts business.

Robert Ross: That's great.

Carroll Shelby: And working with Ford on what they want to put my name on. I want to go out. I want to go flat with the blue oval cause I think Edsel is one of my dearest friends in the world. And now Henry's coming along. And I think Ford is they say that no corporation has a heart and soul. Well, I think Ford does, because I think Edsel Ford has the feeling of his great grandfather, his grandfather and his father. I think he's instilled it in his children, the love of the company. And I think it'll be around a long time, you know. I'm so proud of them because they didn't take any government money.

Robert Ross: That's right.

Carroll Shelby: That was a hell of a gamble. This guy, Mulally, comes out of the airplane business. And it turns out, in my opinion, he's the best automotive executive. And a lot of other people at Ford Field, he's the best executive they may have ever had. And he's the quietest. You never hear anything from him except once in a while he come out, say, oh, by golly, we made a little profit this quarter. Well, we're turning things around a little bit. It's gonna be a long, hard struggle, but I'm tied in with him.

Robert Ross: Well, your company certainly has a heart and soul. Probably more than any automotive company that I can think of, any name in the business. It's got a man behind the name. And obviously a lot of people look to you for not only the successes you've had and the products you've made, but again, for the great cars that are going to come out in the future. And we look forward to driving those.

Carroll Shelby: I don't know what they'll be. All I know is the thing that I'm so terribly proud of is we took some hot rodders from Japan, Australia, France, Spain, England, Germany and went over and beat the best in the world. And there have been 100 companies come to me and want to make a movie of it. And until the movie is made the way I want to make it, giving them the credit, I'm not gonna make the movie. Underdog takes on a big guy But these underdogs were guys that would work for nothing. These guys would work 24 hours. Carol Smith, when we're at LeMans in '66, he has a nervous breakdown because he hasn't been sleep in 36 hours.

Robert Ross: Good Heavens

Carroll Shelby: And there's so many instances of people like that. What Ken Miles and what it took Pete Brock sketched up the Daytona Coupe and it was the prettiest thing you ever saw. But it took Ken Miles and John Collins six months to get it so it would even stay on the ground. And like I've said so many times, anybody, they'll build a car. But a development factor in it is ten times as important and develop it so that it is a true champion. And John Collins sat there for ten thousand miles on the Daytona Coupe on a Coca Cola box sitting next to Ken Miles. When we first started, we tried it at 140 miles an hour and raised the rear end completely off the ground. I had a friend named Benny Howard that built Howard Airplane. He drew out a plan for me. When Pete drew out the

Daytona, he drew, he says, this is what you gotta do, Shelby. You got to extend this tail. You gotta extend this tail. Now go work. Unless you extend the tail,.

Robert Ross: You'll get some downforce.

Carroll Shelby: Right. And I went with Pete because the Daytona was prettier. And that is one of the most stupid things I ever did, except we made it work so you don't knock it. 917 Porsche comes out 10 years later with exactly what he had done, and Bennie was an 8th grade dropout.

Robert Ross: Isn't that amazing?

Carroll Shelby: He became the world's greatest subsonic aero dynamicist In my opinion. So working with people like them. A real pleasure. And as I say, those guys will work for nothing and did work for a pittance compared with what they deserve.

Robert Ross: The last time I saw Carroll Shelby was later on that week, Aston Martin was hosting a party to show their cars to some clients and I decided to pop in. I noticed Carroll kind of in the corner in a bit of a side room. They'd made him the guest of honor because of his famous LeMans victory in 1959. Certainly the most notable victory and driver Aston Martin's ever had. If there's a high point in Aston Martin history, it's because Carol Shelby's name was attached to it. James Bond's DB5 was a marketing stunt. But Shelby's win, that was the real deal. It was clear that Carroll Shelby was the high profile celebrity at the event, but he didn't want to be there and he didn't know anybody. He seemed very lonely at the moment when he saw me, someone he knew, his eyes lit up. He said, Robert, it's so good to see you. And we talked for about 10 or 15 minutes about nothing and everything. And that's the last time I saw him. There won't be another like Carroll Shelby, not someone who could so ably innovate into the future. Or someone as willing to share the spotlight when it was deserved. Let's end with just one more question for Carroll.

Robert Ross: Did you ever imagine that these early cars, both the Cobras and Mustangs, would ever achieve this kind of cult status? This kind of value?

Carroll Shelby: No, No, I never did. And I'm still amazed today and I'm lucky that it happened because, you know, life they say you make your luck. Well, there's a lot of people that work very hard and maybe toss the coin and luck doesn't turn their way and I'm lucky that it has in a lot of ways for me. So lucky. And I never forget that every morning when I wake up, I'm a lucky guy.

Robert Ross: We'll see you next time on Cars that Matter to continue talking about the passions that drive us and the passions we drive.

Robert Ross: This episode of Cars that Matter was hosted by Robert Ross, written by Chris Porter and Robert Ross, produced by Chris Porter, Sound Engineering by Michael Kennedy. Theme Song by Celeste and Eric Dick, recorded at Curtco's Malibu Podcast Studios. Additional Music and Sound by Chris Porter. Please like, subscribe and share this podcast. I'm Robert Ross. Thanks for listening.

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