

Cars That Matter Ep 07 – William Harlan and The Napa Valley Reserve - Transcript

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

Robert Ross: This is Robert Ross with Cars that Matter. Ordinarily, we'd be broadcasting from Curtco's Malibu Studios, but we have a very special opportunity to be in a great place this morning in San Helena at beautiful Meadowwood, Napa Valley. I'm here with two friends whom I've known for a long, long time. H. William Harlan, known to his friends as Bill Harlan and Bruce Meyer, whom I see a little more often down in Los Angeles. Welcome, guys.

Bill Harlan: Thank you.

Bruce Meyer: Thanks so much, Robert.

Robert Ross: Just a quick background, Bill Harlan, of course, is known in the wine world for his Harlan Estate, Promontory and Bond. And among a smaller members-only wine growing estate called the Napa Valley Reserve where we're sitting right now. Bruce, of course, is a Los Angeles celebrity in the car world and elsewhere. Certainly was a founding board member of the Peterson Automotive Museum, founder of the Checkered Flag 200, Bonneville Record Holder and all around car guy. And what kind of brings you guys together up here is an annual event that you both co-host called the Legends of Motor Sport at the Napa Valley Reserve. And what a lot of fun that's been to watch some of these great cars.

Bruce Meyer: And great legends. Now, we started with Phil Hill.

Robert Ross: That's right.

Bruce Meyer: It doesn't seem possible but it's probably been 16, 17 years ago,.

Bill Harlan: This year is the 15th year.

Robert Ross: And so every year you bring up another legend of motor sport. This year, it was Don the Snake, if I'm not mistaken. Don "the Snake" Prudhomme.

Bruce Meyer: Right. We kind of ventured into drag racing, but we've done just about every discipline with Phil Hill and Bobby Rahal, Parnelli, Dan Gurney.

Robert Ross: It's a real who's who.

Bruce Meyer: Yeah. I mean, we've had Indy. We had...

Bill Harlan: Jeff Gordon,

Bruce Meyer: Jeff Gordon, Jeff Gordon, Oh my god. So you have to understand, both Bill and I are just like knocking on the door of 80. So things don't just, like our best friends. I know I'm sitting next to Bill but every now and I look -I know him ...

Robert Ross: You know, it's because you both have too many cars and you can't keep track of them.

Bruce Meyer: Too many cars?.

Robert Ross: Too many cars.

Bruce Meyer: Too many memories.

Robert Ross: There we go. Well, you know, that's actually what this conversations about, because here on Cars that Matter, we talk about, well, just that cars that are really, really important. But the thing that kind of cements the important cars in your lives, I think, and maybe everyone who cherishes a car probably cherishes a friendship more, friendships that came about because of cars and driving experiences that have happened over the years. How long have you guys known one another?

Bruce Meyer: About 60 years of us now and.

Bill Harlan: yeah Just about 60 years.

Robert Ross: Wow. Where did that start?

Bruce Meyer: It started at the fraternity house.

Robert Ross: Is that right?

Bruce Meyer: The Beta Theta Pi House at Berkeley.

Robert Ross: Oh, boy. But there are some stories that go back to that.

Bruce Meyer: Just line me up.

Bill Harlan: Luckily you don't remember those.

Bruce Meyer: I do remember those. Bill's trying to forget, but I remember them well because Bill was a water polo star, he coached the water polo team. You know, the guy was like a Greek god. Yeah. And he rode around on his Matchless and

Robert Ross: Matchless, oh wow.

Bruce Meyer: Bill is an amazing driver and motorcycle racer. I think the Harlan family in general has been a racing family. 'Cause Frank Harlan is also a Bonneville record holder, and Bill and Frank are fearless and they are talented. And they really touch all the disciplines because Frank has even raced stockcars. Bill, when we all started messing with bikes up at Berkeley, you know, we all start out as a novice.

Robert Ross: And if you live long enough, you move on to.

Bruce Meyer: Expert.

Robert Ross: Expert. That's right.

Bruce Meyer: I never even came close to expert. But Bill was an expert. I'm just stealing the mike right now because I know Bill won't talk about it, but I will.

Robert Ross: He's a modest guy.

Bruce Meyer: He is super modest guy.

Bill Harlan: Bruce is a great storyteller. I mean, you can, if my life was as good as how Bruce makes it out to be things would have been fantastic.

Bruce Meyer: It's way better.

Bill Harlan: Bruce was having a fantastic time all along the way. Not only was he a great storyteller. He was a great instigator of fun, really a pollinator of people. And some way he just attracted everyone, someone that no matter what happened when Bruce's around, things were better,.

Robert Ross: Probably the same way today. But.

Bill Harlan: He hasn't slowed down at all.

Robert Ross: I know. I know he hasn't. What's your motto? Never lift.

Bruce Meyer: Never lift.

Robert Ross: Well, that says a lot about how you drive and how you live your lives.

Bruce Meyer: Gearheads would know never lift. But even some of my gearheads when I sign my letters never lift. They think I hurt my back or something. What it means is, don't take your foot off the gas. Just keep it firmly planted on the gas, Never lift..

Robert Ross: Yeah, that's right. Never whether it's a 911 or something a little more manageable. You just don't know how to get through life's curves.

Robert Ross: We ended up taking a detour in our conversation and talked all about Bill's motorcycle racing days and how Bruce would organize friends to attend the rally.

And it's amazing that we weren't even talking about cars yet. But really, that's because it's all about friendships and machines, regardless of how many wheels they have.

Bruce Meyer: Well, at the end of the day, it's all about friendships. If somebody said you get to have any car on earth and you say, oh, I'd love to have a GTO, you know, what is it, 60, 70, 80 million dollars? And you had a GTO and you're the last man on earth. What fun is that?

Robert Ross: That's right.

Bruce Meyer: So the fun is sharing it with people, doing things with friends, like minded friends, and being together and enjoying it together. And that's a lot of the reason I'm here at the Napa Valley Reserve, which is a premier wine country club that Bill just dreamt up out of the blue.

Robert Ross: That's right.

Bruce Meyer: He said he was putting together this country club, so to speak, based around wine. They were gonna do the crush and pruning in there. They might even get into beekeeping. And just something all the great disciplines that revolve around the Napa Valley.

Bill Harlan: I can smell the grapes fermenting right now.

Bruce Meyer: Oh it's fabulous. It's fabulous. and Bill, just - Where we are right now is the homesite where Bill lived. And Bill always lived in very modest homes. And he brought up his kids very modestly as well. But he'd started talking to me about this concept of going, Hello, Bill. You know, you're talking to Bruce. Here's your jamoke down in L.A.. You know, I know red wine from white wine. That's, that's where it ends, you know? So he said no. And this is the way he sold me on it. He said, Bruce, you said, I'm not calling you because you're such a great wine expert. But wine is more about people getting together, enjoying a good time, being in a nice place and enjoying friendships.

Robert Ross: Just like these cars.

Bruce Meyer: And so that resonated with me because I mean, I can do that as well as anybody. That's right. So that's how I got kind of involved in this thing. And he started telling about the activities. And that's when I said, Bill, what about like, I'm thinking motorcycles and cars? And he said, great idea. You'll be the director of motor sport. There we go. That's how it started

Bill Harlan: That's how it all began. And he puts it together every year. He's the one who finds the legends and he finds a lot of the enthusiasts in the club. We have a lot of members. Wine is really the common thread among all of us. If we eat and drink, no matter what our interests are, no matter what our business in life is, no matter what our hobbies are, politics, any of those things, wine is a common threads. One of the things that was important to us when we were kids and still is, is motor sports Especially if you grew up here in California.

Robert Ross: That's right, car capital of the world,.

Bill Harlan: especially in the 40s and 50s, 60s. And there's a wonderful place to drive cars to get out in the country, et cetera. Bruce has rounded up a handful of members for us, maybe even more than that. Wasn't it the exact reason for it in the beginning but all of a sudden, people that were into the motor sports decided wine isn't so bad.

Robert Ross: You know, it all kind of goes together. You go for a great drive and you come back and you have a wonderful dinner and wine to make it very, very special. You know, it's funny. I was taking a little hike yesterday around the Meadowwood property, you've got a beautiful hiking trail here. And as I was going up on the hill, I realized that you and your friends were all taking off for a day's rally. And I basically just froze and watched a parade of incredible cars leave the property and tried to imagine what each and every one of them was. I know you were taking the lead, Bill, in a beautiful Bentley.

Bill Harlan: Yes. Bruce put me in the front because I'm from the area. I probably wouldn't get as lost as fast. as everybody else.

Bruce Meyer: Nobody passes Bill.

Robert Ross: There we go. Boy, that's quite a car. I mean, just the quintessential green flying bee.

Bill Harlan: Well, my theory is about cars. If you could get out of your car and walk away without turning around and looking at it, you've got the wrong car. And so over these years, there was one that was missing. And I talked to Bruce about here and there. And we were at an auction about five or six years ago. And one came up and didn't, I couldn't quite get to being willing to pay for it when they wanted for one. Then I was with Bruce at an auction a few years ago. And another friend of Bruce's, fellow by the name of Bruce Canepa, sitting between those two guys before the auction was over,

Robert Ross: That's a dangerous pair to be sandwiched in between because they both have about as much experience. And it's like the cartoons where there's a little devil on each shoulder, you know? Tell you what to do. Right.

Bill Harlan: You captured that exactly right. So I ended up with this car.

Robert Ross: Fantastic.

Bill Harlan: But now that I have it, I like it even better than I thought I would. And so it was a great day yesterday.

Robert Ross: Isn't that great? It's fantastic. I know you've got an old Bentley too, a 4.5, is that right?

Bruce Meyer: Yeah,.

Robert Ross: That's a special car. But you weren't not driving that yesterday.

Bruce Meyer: I was driving a little Alfa. It's a neat little car.

Robert Ross: It's fantastic. There is nothing better than the rear end of that Alfa, the little cam tail.

Bruce Meyer: That's right.

Robert Ross: Beautiful, beautiful flat black and the tail lights. What a great car. I saw it. I didn't realize that was your car.

Bruce Meyer: That's a car, that is that is an enthusiast's car. But it's really a connoisseur's car.

Robert Ross: Yes, it is.

Bruce Meyer: It's not high horsepower,.

Robert Ross: no

Bruce Meyer: It's like thirteen hundred pounds. Sixteen hundred CC's. But they call them baby GTOs. And it's an acquired taste driving it. The visuals. You have to know what you're looking at.

Robert Ross: Oh, man. I knew what I was looking at. It looked fantastic.

Bruce Meyer: You would understand that, Robert.

Robert Ross: Of course, it's just like being inside of coffee can filled with rocks. There's nothing makes more racket because it's really just literally a little body shell on a right frame and that's about it.

Bruce Meyer: Ok, thank you for recognizing a great car because I had it up here. I thought, well, this would be kind of a cool thing. I don't think anybody here had any clue what that car was.

Bill Harlan: I did.

Bruce Meyer: Yeah. Bill of course.

Robert Ross: Well, Bill's a connoisseur and he likes odd machines. I'm convinced that when we're young, when we're in our teens, you imprint early and what you see when you're 12 or 13 years old kind of sticks with you for life, and that's what makes cars such incredible points of reference as we go through life. We look back and we say, man, when I was 15 years old, I was in love and her name was this and the car was named this. And all of those things continue to resonate for decades and decades and decades.

Bruce Meyer: And I think we grew up in exactly.

Robert Ross: Oh, man, you guys , you were in the Golden Age

Bruce Meyer: We grew up in the 40s, so we had hot rods which were just dream machines.

Robert Ross: Boy, there were a couple I saw yesterday, some '32 Fords. That were just dead gorgeous,.

Bruce Meyer: 100 percent. And so we enjoyed hot rodding. We enjoyed the birth of drag racing, which was last night with the Snake. We kind of got into motorcycles when they were safer.

Robert Ross: That's right. Because there weren't so many crazy people on the road.

Bruce Meyer: They were slower and there weren't so many people texting and driving.

Bill Harlan: That's right.

Bruce Meyer: So when you just look at the time that we grew up.

Bill Harlan: And place.

Bruce Meyer: And place. That's right. We had 12 months of beautiful driving, That's that's really a good point Bill.

Robert Ross: And of course, they were always expensive, always out of reach a little bit. But the good news is that back in the 60s, kind of in the early 70s, these were just old used cars. And that made it great, too. They weren't these precious, you know, 10, 20, 30 million dollar artifacts. You could actually buy a 275 GTP and drive it.

Bruce Meyer: When we started focusing on exotic sports cars like a gullwing a gullwing was four or five thousand dollar. Today, the radio upgrade is four or five grand. So, I mean, you know, you could buy a '40 Ford for 50 dollars. If you had a paper corner, you could afford that kind of stuff that we had.

Bill Harlan: I would say between the time I was 16 and time I was 18, I had five cars that I paid less than one hundred dollars for.

Robert Ross: Isn't that amazing?

Bill Harlan: And then stepped up to 150 bucks for a car. But we could work on them. We could custom, we do anything we wanted to. We could paint them, we could change the engine. We could do anything.

Robert Ross: If I had to kind of ask both of you, your first real car, what was the first real car you bought?

Bruce Meyer: So I bought a Porsche in 1960 from John von Neumann.in Hollywood. And I went, yeah, it was a 61 Porsche. I took delivery in May of 61. And that really started me with the Porsche. I've driven Porsche since 1961. I don't think, Bill, is that we had a Porsche.

Bill Harlan: But as far as for me, the first car was a '37 Hudson. That was actually a pretty neat car. But it was pretty fast,.

Robert Ross: Straight six.

Bill Harlan: It was a, I think that was an eight cylinder car.

Robert Ross: Oh An eight. Oh, yeah. Okay.

Bill Harlan: And was a four-door, running boards that had curtains that came down in the back. It was kind of a neat thing. I paid \$35 for that car.

Robert Ross: I love it.

Bill Harlan: And then the next car that was kind of a cool car was a '41 Ford convertible and that was \$150 car. After the '41 Ford, I got a '51 Oldsmobile and it was a convertible also. You know, as soon as you get your car at that time, you head across the border to Tijuana and get tuck and roll upholstery.

Robert Ross: That's right Tuck and roll,

Yeah.

Bill Harlan: And I had that thing lowered pretty much to the ground. I painted it purple. It was the first car you'd see in those days.

Robert Ross: You were an early adopter of what became a complete East L.A. phenomenon.

Bruce Meyer: Yeah, he was in Whittier.

Robert Ross: You were a tastemaker

Bill Harlan: Well, I'm not sure it was taste, but we were having some fun.

Bruce Meyer: Did you have the name like a song title on the back?

Bill Harlan: We did have names for our cars.

Bruce Meyer: Painted on? Dreamboat or.

Bill Harlan: That car was the Purple Passion, I'd like to admit..

Bruce Meyer: This is good.

Bill Harlan: I'm not sure I should ever admit that one.

Robert Ross: You can't make this stuff up. But the friendship goes even deeper with a fascinating story about one particular car that was one of the first, quote unquote, foreign cars purchased between them.

Bruce Meyer: When I was at Berkeley, I was a bartender at a place called the Rathskeller. And it was the place to be. Larry Blake, who owned the place loved any Cal athletes. And he encouraged us to buy beers for the Cal athletes. Of course, Bill was a Cal athlete, so I rightfully took care of Bill. I don't think you ever bought a beer there, but

Bill Harlan: Wasn't so bad.

Robert Ross: Sounds like the place to be. Helps to know the bartender.

Bruce Meyer: But after graduating, I went up to Lake Tahoe to be kind of a bartender waiter at this place called the Forest Inn. And at Lake Tahoe, there was ,still is, a place called the Sierra Tahoe Boat Company. They specialized in classic wooden boats.

Robert Ross: Oh, boy.

Bruce Meyer: And I had my little Porsche out there and I would go over there and just drool.

Robert Ross: drool worthy, aren't they.

Bruce Meyer: My God. it was a fellow named Dick Clark, who ran it and the guy that owned it at the time, was a fellow named Morlan Visel. And Morlan had a Gullwing and evidently had some engine problems with it and took the Gullwing engine out and put into 327 Chevy engine,.

Robert Ross: Which was common practice back then.

Bruce Meyer: And I remember walking through the boathouse. And I saw this Gullwing with Rudge wheels, factory Rudge wheels. I always, I mean, a Gullwing was like the first supercar. I mean, come on. I mean,.

Robert Ross: It is still a supercar. It's really kind, in a lot of ways the first modern car that you can still drive today.

Bruce Meyer: A hundred percent. So I look and I see this car sitting there. And at that time, it had a reverse trigger on it, you know. And I mean, I knew what that was. I knew it had an American engine in it. So I went right away to the office and talk to Dick Clark. Does that Gullwing have a Chevy engine in it? And he goes yeah, and I go, Oh, my God, the perfect combination. no foreign.

Robert Ross: An exotic car with a motor that won't break.

Bruce Meyer: That's right.

Robert Ross: So drive to Pepboys and buy a set of plugs and you're out the door for 10 bucks..

Bruce Meyer: And by the way people called them foreign cars, meaning like nobody can work on them.

Robert Ross: And boy, nobody could work on one of those, fuel injection goes out on one of those things. You had to be a master watchmaker to fix it.

Bruce Meyer: I sold my Porsche at Lake Tahoe. I took every penny I made for the whole summer. And I bought this car and I drove it home. I had it for about a year and I would take my friends for rides in this thing and they would just screamed for me to stop. You know, it was really fast. And I drove it up to Berkley for a football game or something from down in L.A. And the guy that owned the Triumph shop,.

Bill Harlan: Tony Metze.

Bruce Meyer: Tony Metze,.

Bill Harlan: My sponsor.

Robert Ross: Wow.

Bruce Meyer: Oh, he sponsored you in racing.

Bill Harlan: He was my sponsor for racing the bikes.

Bill Harlan: So Tony got the car from me and sold it to Bill. On the rally yesterday did you see a black Gullwing?

Robert Ross: I sure did.

Bruce Meyer: That's the car.

Robert Ross: The black one with Rudge Wheels.

Bruce Meyer: The black one with the Rudge wheels that has a Chevy engine in it. And he's had that car white. Fifty five years, probably.

Bill Harlan: 54 years.

Robert Ross: That's amazing.

Bruce Meyer: So, Bill. The other thing about Bill, he doesn't sell stuff.

Robert Ross: I love it.

Bruce Meyer: He's very particular on what he buys. And then he just doesn't sell it.

Bill Harlan: It look totally stock except for the shifting lever, but it didn't have the fitted luggage that the Gullwing's had. So I wanted to get fitted luggage for it. So I open the paper in the morning, to see if any Gullwing would be for sale. One day one came up. So I went out with my brother, got there first in the morning, looked at the car, tried to

talk him out of the fitted luggage. And then this car was perfect, had sixteen hundred miles on like a brand new car. The guy wouldn't sell me the fitted luggage without the car. Well, I didn't have enough money to buy the car. My brother was with me and he was very, very conservative. And so he was already married and had a couple of kids. I was still single, but he saved everything. So I talked him into lending me the money to buy that car. So now I have two and they are painted the exact same color. You couldn't tell me apart. I had to sell one because I couldn't afford both. I had to pay my brother back. So I sold it. I paid actually around.

Robert Ross: I'm going to start crying.

Bill Harlan: Around thirty five hundred dollars. I think I paid for that car. I sold it a year later, like for four grand. I think I made a little bit of money, but I kept the luggage.

Robert Ross: Fantastic. What you wanted in the first place.

Bill Harlan: I still have it. And even though, you know, the original car would be worth more money. This car is like a friend.

Robert Ross: That's right.

Bill Harlan: I mean, I think about the old days, talk about our parents that maybe had a horse and buggy before their car. You think of your car almost as well as they probably thought about their horse.

Robert Ross: That's incredible. What a way to connect all the dots and to be able to have held on to something that long really does say something about the commitment and passion.

Robert Ross: Talk about a car that matters. Let's take a quick break and then we'll be right back.

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pulse of health care in the modern world available on all your favorite podcasting platforms produced by Curtco Media.

Robert Ross: Well, we're back with Cars that Matter and Bill Harlan and Bruce Meyer, old friends with a lot of old cars in common, in fact we hear some out there going up the road.

Robert Ross: We are at Meadowood Napa Valley, so we're not at the quiet of a studio. In fact, we've got some frogs and woodpeckers and all kinds of things going on around us. And it just reminds us what a beautiful place we're in. And am I mistaken? Was there, was there a 275 GTB story that you guys could share?

Bruce Meyer: It's a great story.

Bill Harlan: Let me tell a story before that. The second car that I ever saw was a 275 GTB. I saw that car and about three years later, I was able to buy one. So I kept it for a few years and it was a nineteen sixty five I guess, and it had, the drive shaft was always getting out of balance.

Robert Ross: Right.

Bill Harlan: And I couldn't afford to keep it going, to own the car and also keep it the drive shaft in balance and everything else. So I ended up selling it. Really what I wanted was the yellow one. So I sold it at about nineteen seventy one I'd say 70 or 71. So that's the story on me selling the red one to get a yellow one. But I never could quite afford the other things. I wanted to keep my life going until one day I called Bruce.

Bruce Meyer: So this is I mean, this is like a divine story, OK? the big boy upstairs divine. I got a call from a Beverly Hills policeman, and I think I know every garage in Beverly Hills. And he said, Bruce, there's a lady. Her husband died eleven years ago. She has a Ferrari in the garage and she wants to sell it. I said, you know, I'm not a dealer. I'm not sure I'm the right guy. And I'm thinking it's a car that I probably know nothing about. So he just said, please, just go and talk to her and make nice. OK, I get to the house. This lady was so sweet. Her husband was an Austrian Olympian skier. She had a like a funky motorhome. She moved out of the way, the garage. She opens

up the garage. And the garage is full of litter and boxes. And there's this car covered and she rolls back the cover. You could have knocked me over with a feather. Here is a alloy bodied, 275 GTB torque-tube, six carburetor, outside gas cap,.

Robert Ross: Alloy,.

Bruce Meyer: All original, original paint, everything. And I'm going, oh, my God. It was like the most beautiful thing, I mean, tell me, how did you. What is the story in this car? She said. My husband bought this car from Chris Cord. He and his wife Katrina went on their honeymoon in this car in 1966. They bought it brand new. Picked it up at the factory, drove it, brought it back to the U.S. and sold it to my husband in 1966. So. I'm going, oh, my God, shit. My husband died like eleven years ago. It's been sitting here and I think it's just time that it needs to go. And can you help me sell it? I don't have any idea what the value of this car is because I really didn't alloy body, outside gas cap. I think they made two or three of that year. You know what I think? I put her in my car. I drove her to my house, which was like a walk away. And I showed her Bill Doheney's car, which was a twin to this car. Fast forward like six months or so. And she said, Bruce, I've decided to sell the car. I've decided on the price. But, you know, I just don't like the guy. I said, you know what? I just think it over. Let me think about it. I got a call from Bill and he said, you know, I'm turning. And it was 60. I'm turning 60 on Saturday.

Bill Harlan: Over 19 years ago.

Bruce Meyer: And I want to buy myself a car. And Bill and I have always talked about cars. And, you know, he says, what do you think of this? And, you know, so we've always had conversations about cars or if something comes up that I think Bill ought to have. Yeah. You know, I have no problem.

Robert Ross: Once again, the devil in the shoulder.

Bruce Meyer: Yeah. Anyways, I'd like to get a 275. I'd love a yellow one. And now I'm thinking he's messing with me. There's no way that he's saying definitely no. There's no there's no way he would say I want a 275, a yellow 275. That's beyond coincidence. I start messing with Bill because I'm thinking he knows something. There's no possible way he would just call me out of the blue. And it's not like we talk every day or every

week or every month. He just called me and said he wants... And after querying him, I realized he had no idea.

Robert Ross: He didn't know.

Bruce Meyer: I said, okay, here's the deal. You FedEx me, tomorrow, information on Meadowwood about yourself. FedEx me anything you can about your lifestyle. And I'm gonna make your day. I said just trust me. And I said, I want you to come down here on Friday. I call Michelle. I'm gonna make your day. You're going to receive tomorrow information about a guy that is the absolute right owner for your car. I'm pretty good about talking about Bill, because I, you know, I'm a huge fan

Robert Ross: You're the master of ceremonies, you introduce people.

Bruce Meyer: So she said, oh, I'm so excited, Bruce. And we have a friend of ours, Chip Conner, who had a garage in LA. And I said, Chip, can I borrow your mechanic to come over? I want to bring some Marvel Mystery oil and some plug wrenches and stuff.

Robert Ross: and see if she starts after all these years.

Bruce Meyer: And I had Ed Brown the tow guy, you know Ed Brown.

Robert Ross: O sure, everybody's best friend, I have him on speed dial.

Bruce Meyer: That's right. We all do. So Bill flies down. He has no idea. He's just got check with him. I have Ed Brown there. And Marty, who is Chip's mechanic. And we all converge at Michelle's. To make a long story short, Bill buys the car. And of course, Bill still has it today. And he takes it right to, at that time, Phil Riley and company and has him go through it. Make sure everything's perfect. And so the two of us have our twin 275s, long nose, six carburetors. His is way rarer than mine. And it's just like one of those magical stories, you know, that just was meant to be.

Robert Ross: Well, if she has any other garages with any other dusty old cars in them, give me a call. Let me see what I can do. What a great story.

Bruce Meyer: Isn't that fabulous? And so the car has a great owner.

Robert Ross: Two guys that don't sell their cars. I love it.

Bill Harlan: Even today, here we are almost 20 years later, she comes up about every four or five years to see her car. She still loves that car, checks in on the phone every so often. And so it's just a wonderful experience, this whole thing with Bruce, with Michelle, with the car. And then just, it's fate.

Robert Ross: What a fantastic thing.

Bruce Meyer: So a fellow named Peter Sachs about 10 years ago, probably, called and said Bruce, what do you think about doing an event up, you know, in the Napa Valley, I said, oh, my gosh, this is perfect. I know right who to call. So I called Bill. The whole thing happened, right here at Meadowwood where they had 23 GTOs.

Robert Ross: Out of what? Thirty seven were made.

Bruce Meyer: And you know these guys, they don't like publicity. They don't want to contaminate their events with anything other than GTO's.

Robert Ross: That's right.

Bruce Meyer: The only way that I would get involved organizing this thing with my pal Bill is that both of us are included in the rally.

Robert Ross: Right. let a 275 or two two in there.

Bruce Meyer: Yeah. So our two yellow 275s hung with the GTOs. And we had a great rally right at Bill's resort at Meadowwood and I don't think they've ever had so many together at one time. And maybe the most beautiful place on earth is the winery Bond. And we have pictures of the gathering at Bond. And Bond, by the way, is another one of Bill's enterprises. You've been to Bond, correct?

Robert Ross: Yes. I have. What a place.

Bruce Meyer: Can you imagine? You know, you sit in that reception area and you see the parking out front and.

Robert Ross: You're looking down on two and a half billion dollars worth of Ferraris.

Bruce Meyer: Yeah,.

Robert Ross: And by the way. That's only 20 cars.

Bruce Meyer: That's right.

Robert Ross: Not to crunch the numbers too quickly. But I can't resist.

Bruce Meyer: Yeah.

Robert Ross: Let's get a little friendly debate go between you guys. I know you're friends, but I'm sure there are some friendly disagreements, too. Let me ask, you got your desert island. You've got a nice road on it. And you can only have one of your favorite cars. What are you going to drive?

Bill Harlan: I would take the Allard. The Allard is a car that is like an old friend again. I've had that car since 1969, I think.

Robert Ross: Amazing. Now, now just just for our audience who probably doesn't know from Allard, obviously it's a British car with a big American motor. How would you define that as a significant car both historically and today?

Bill Harlan: It's almost like a hot rod. It's a British body and frame etc. with a Cadillac engine.

Robert Ross: That was well in advance of Carol Shelby's 260 and 289 Cobras. So they forged the way for big American motors.

Bill Harlan: This kind of transitional hybrid car put together in two basic countries. The car.

Robert Ross: back when hybrid meant something else

Bill Harlan: Anyway, I would say that the design of the car is probably from the thirties, but with a big engine in it, it could compete, but it was pretty wild car.

Robert Ross: What a great looking car too. It's just fantastic with those fenders. Those outboard fenders kind of hugging the tires.

Bill Harlan: Yeah, it's a car when you see it, if you got any interest in something that might be exciting, that was it.

Bruce Meyer: I'm not surprised at what Bill came up with. Sydney Allard was the Carol Shelby of the fifties.

Robert Ross: He just didn't make the mark that Shelby did. And his cars are much more of a refined and esoteric acquired taste.

Bruce Meyer: But whatever the engine is in that car is what it came with. I can tell you when you see if you could see this car,.

Robert Ross: That's unheard of, by the way.

Bruce Meyer: Right.

Robert Ross: Those things used to, they'd blow engines and replace them right...

Bruce Meyer: Oh, I know. And people would take the Cadillac and they pump it up and they make it look like the old Cadillac. The engine in Bill's car is the original engine and a three speed transmission because the first thing guys did when they started racing at Laguna Seca , you know. Throw a four speed in it or mess with it. Bill never messed with it. And I can remember so clearly when Bill ran his Allard. We're talking the first year, the Historics. Bill called me and said, there's an event up at Laguna Seco, why

don't you come up, we stayed at the Green Lantern in Carmel. And Bill drove his Allard down from San Francisco and he raced it, kicked butt and packed his stuff and went home.

Robert Ross: And drove it home.

Bruce Meyer: And drove it home. But what made Bill so at ease in that hour is that Bill really loves sideways. You know, the brakes go out after the first lap in an hour. So the way you stop it, I mean, is to pitch it. And I just happened to be standing next to Steve Earle, who is the organizer. And this guy came up and was like apoplectic that Bill Harlan was gonna kill somebody because he was so sideways and so out of control. And where that guy didn't realize that he was so in control. Anyways, I can remember the way he drove that.

Bill Harlan: I tell you, Bruce is a good storyteller. No, if my life was as good as his stories...

Robert Ross: I have a feeling it's probably pretty close. Bruce, you know, Carroll Shelby's obviously one of those larger than life characters and you've had a long friendship with him during all those many years when he was kind of the luminary of the racing scene. When did you first meet him?

Bruce Meyer: I met Carroll Shelby in the mid-80's and a friend of mine knew him and put us together. And I wanted to get the glovebox signed on my Cobra.

Robert Ross: Oh, boy, I hear you there.

Bruce Meyer: You know what I mean? And so, like everybody. So he was nice enough to come by my garage. And then shortly thereafter, he was waiting for a heart and he would come by when he was in the area driving by. So we spent a lot of time together. He was a very close friend of Robert E. Peterson. And I hosted them for lunch in my country club more than once. Quite a few times. And they would sit there and they'd have their see through's.

Robert Ross: See through's?

Bruce Meyer: See through is a drink, like vodka or gin. I remember that one time we sat and we met at noon and it was like two o'clock in the lunch service was starting to close and they were like on their third see through.

Robert Ross: Oh man that had to be fun.

Bruce Meyer: And the stories, both of those guys lived lives that you just can't

Robert Ross: Larger than life.

Bruce Meyer: Larger than life. And I had nothing to add to the conversation, but I would just sit there going, oh, you are kidding.

Robert Ross: They were both great. I mean, I know with Carroll, you'd set up the mike and basically just kick back. And it would be a story like you've never heard before.

Bruce Meyer: Absolutely,

Robert Ross: And he might be making it up on the fly.

Bruce Meyer: But his stories were so great and he remembered everything. And I would just sit there in awe, my jaw and my you know. And he and Robert E. Peterson would chat. And then he had another good friend, Johnny Myers. And Johnny Myers was Jack Northrup's best friend, the test pilot for the flying wing. I grew up with Johnny Meyer's son, Lou. So I kind of hung around the Meyers. We all used to have boats up at the lake and so forth. So I spent a lot of time with Carroll. The stories were amazing. He was an amazing guy. I mean, from the most amazing salesman to a, some people said scoundrel, some people said...

Robert Ross: He could sell the proverbial ice to the Eskimos. But it was good ice when he made it.

Bruce Meyer: It was good. You know, I mean, he really brought it home and a friend of mine growing up in LA, the largest Ford dealer wasn't Galpin at that time. It was Coberly Ford.

Robert Ross: That's right.

Bruce Meyer: And Bill Corbely and I went to high school together. So we were absolute best friends in high school. And I remember in the mid '60s when Bill was saying because he would go back to these big dealer conventions, Carroll Shelby just held up Ford for an enormous amount of money on this LeMans project. Carroll knew how to charge. He wasn't shy.

Robert Ross: Of course, if they hear Carroll tell the story. He didn't get paid a dime. I got paid a pittance. I got paid a pittance.

Bruce Meyer: That's right.

Robert Ross: He'll tell you those stories.

Bruce Meyer: You think about it. The time that I grew up in was the best time in the automotive history ever world.

Robert Ross: Yes it was.

Bruce Meyer: You know, from hotrods on and Carroll Shelby was a hot rodder. I've got a picture of Dan Gurney's Chop Five Window in my garage. The whole Shelby effort were hot rodders. And that's what built this country. And I have spent a lot of my time, as you know, Robert, trying to draw attention and give genuine hot rodders their due because...

Robert Ross: They were the unsung heroes. And without them, none of these cars, none of the enthusiasm, none of the styling, none of that stuff would exist today.

Bruce Meyer: And, you know, early on in the '40s, they were like Hells Angels. You just used the word hotrod, you got your mouth washed out with soap. I mean, these are the

guys that built it all. Carroll Shelby was the real deal. He could drive. He knew how to hire a team.

Robert Ross: That's right. Motivate. He was, he was an inspirational character.

Bruce Meyer: When you look at his team members, from Phil Hill to Dan Gurney to Dave McDonald, the team, the technicians, the Ken Miles, Phil Remingtons, tell me in the world ever has anybody put together a team like that? Never. And that was all Carroll Shelby, for all of his flaws, for all the kind of stuff he tried to sneak through. You gotta just give him a standing O.

Robert Ross: You absolutely do.

Bruce Meyer: People ask me, what is my favorite car? The Cobra may not be the most famous car I've ever owned, but it's my favorite car. I mean, you get in that car, you fired it up and it just comes to life, just like the Allard. It's visceral, it handles. It's challenging.

Robert Ross: And they're never gonna make him like that again. We'll be right back.

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 it. 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 light. 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 to Cars That Matter. Unfortunately, Bruce had to take off shortly after that. But another friend of ours stopped by. Brett Anderson, director of culture and communications. The Napa Valley Reserve, is integral to the car collector scene. So I couldn't resist talking to the men behind the property in the vineyard. We poured another glass of wine. It would be an opportunity missed if we didn't talk about the fellow who's responsible for shaping the Napa Valley and its wines and its wine culture. Nobody's done what Bill Harlan has achieved. And I think it's probably an opportune time to reflect on not just the wines that you've created, the Napa Valley Reserve, but the culture that you're responsible for. Bill, there's a lot of history there. Brett, I know you've come up here recently to work with Bill, and you've probably got a lot of stories to tell.

Brett Anderson: Certainly many stories over the years. I've known Bill for quite a while and a year and a half ago, he convinced me to join his team, helping on the communication side of things. But I've always been a great admirer of the wines, and Bill inspired me in that regard. And I'm happy now to have the opportunity to contribute in a very small way to the culture that he's built. But it's interesting, Bill, we're at the Napa Valley Reserve right now. And in many ways your experience in Napa Valley, I know, began when you were very young and visited here. But this property is part of a larger property that kind of became the beginning of your getting serious about Napa Valley.

Bill Harlan: I came up here in the late 50s, moved from southern California to northern California to go to school. I hadn't been here for about two or three months when I heard there was a place where you can go wine tasting. I've come here with schools and fraternity guys all have a pretty good idea of where the in places are and what's going on. And so they said, there's a place where you go wine tasting and they didn't check your I.D. and the girls like going out there and wine tasting was free and its pretty good program for college students. So that's when I first came up. And then in 1959 came back and did "in quotes" a documentary on the Napa Valley to get in behind the scenes to see how it worked up here. And at that time, I said, some day, if I could ever afford it, I'd like to buy a little piece of land and plant a vineyard. Find a wife, raise a family, that kind of thing. That took me another 20 years before I was able to acquire first piece of property, which is pretty much here. Meadowwood in this property, Napa Valley Reserve, right next door to each other. We ended up living here, raised our kids here on

this property. And then over the years, as we were able to build Meadowwood, we entered into this property with an agreement to lease it and with the intent to acquire it. It took 20 years to finally put that together. So here we are now, 40 years later and everything started to come together.

Robert Ross: And finally started to come together. What an incredible story. Well, kind of like your cars, you keep your cars for a long time and keep your vision for a long time to these are lifetime visions.

Bill Harlan: Now all I need is a few more lifetimes.

Brett Anderson: Bill, I know you've told me. Robert Mondavi was obviously an icon in this business and was part of the inspiration for what you ultimately decided to do.

Bill Harlan: Yes, what happened was I had gone to the opening of the Robert Mondavi Winery in 1966, and I didn't get the nod for the opening night, but I was there the opening week. And it was a huge inspiration. It was the first winery in Napa Valley of any consequence after the repeal of prohibition. That gave me an even further incentive to try to start my own. And then when I acquired this property here, I got a call from Robert Mondavi within I'd say 30 to 60 days after we acquired the property. And he invited me to lunch. And when you get a call from Robert Mondavi and he invites you to lunch. Obviously, you want to show up. And he asked me why I bought the property. I told him this romantic idea. And I asked him why he invited me to lunch. And he said, well, this property that you acquired, I think has way more potential than your romantic idea. And I think that this would be a great place for common ground. I asked him, what does he mean by that? And he said that to start out as a little club, there were seven little rooms that they would rent out for people that were visiting the Napa Valley frequently. And he said this would be a great place to continue to do that. And I said, well, how does that make sense? He says, well, let me give you some perspective. He says, what I want to do is do a wine auction. I think this would be a great place for it. I would like to send you to Europe. Few weeks in Bordeaux. And a week in Burgundy. And the end of the trip, you'll visit the Hospice de Beaune, which is a wine auction that had been going on for many, many decades, over a century. So I went on that trip and I came back with a whole different perspective. It changed my time perspective from time was really, really important to thinking about time, generations and even then centuries.

Brett Anderson: What? Did you do when you came back here and what was the decision process that that trip spawned?

Bill Harlan: First of all, I agreed with Robert Mondavi that we would work on creating this place as a common ground. My personal intent, along with that primary reason I came here, was I wanted to grow a vineyard and to make wine. What I really wanted to do at that time was create, in quotes, a first growth of California, a wine that someday hopefully could be recognized among the fine wines of the world. So what I had learned on this trip and a little bit of reading and things, I'd been along the way. If you want to produce a wine, that's really, really a fine wine, it needs to come from a place. So the most important thing is to find really, really the best land. And so that's the foundation. To try to build a wine growing estate and not own the land was not something I was interested in. This first 40 years of the 200 year plan was really about trying to identify and capture some of the very best land in America, which I feel is Napa Valley is, they produce higher quality wine for a longest period time of red wine, cabernet based wine than any place in America. So I wanted to be here and I wanted to try to figure out how to capture this land in a way that we create something beyond what I had done up until now. So that was the dream. A bit presumptuous, but that was the idea.

Brett Anderson: What were your first steps?

Bill Harlan: First step was to start to learn about the wine business. Well, I was looking for land. So we started a winery and by buying fruit from different growers to get to understand the land. And over the next five years, I did this research, started making wine learned about the wine business, everything from growing grapes to making wine to understanding how the distribution network works in the wine business. This winery had turned into a warehouse, so acquired the property, converted it into a winery where we could learn and so had that property for about 13 years. We grew it from about 450 cases to about forty five thousand cases, made every mistake known to man. But we learned a lot. We bought fruit from over 60 different growers, probably closer to 80 different growers over that period of time. And so we really got to understand the lands of the Napa Valley.

Brett Anderson: What about the land in the western hills of Oakville drew you to it.

Bill Harlan: The best wine in the Napa Valley was on the west side of the valley. What they called the bench lands. Oakville, Rutherford a bit. So I wanted to be as close to there. But the most valuable vineyards in the world were always in the hills, especially where they've done the most amount of research over the longest period of time. Well over a thousand years is in Burgundy, and you'll find the Grand Cru's, the finest vineyards are on the slopes, not down on the floor of the valley or at the top of the hill. But what I think of as a tenderloin. So that was the kind of land I wanted to own. Land like that would have been in the western hills, but they were all in forests and woodlands. So I was able to acquire a piece of land, the first 40 acres and from there began to grow.

Brett Anderson: And at the time that you acquired that land, you had a hunch, but you didn't really know that it was unable to produce the kind of wine you wanted.

Bill Harlan: No, we didn't. So tried to hire the people that knew more about these things and certainly more than I did at that time. So we acquired that land, cleared the land, brought in new roads, brought in the infrastructure plan and the vineyards and began making wine. That was in nineteen eighty-four. So here we are thirty five years later or so. That's Harlan estate and we've, we have a good start. The challenge now is working, bringing the next generation along. So we've been working on that now for about really 20 years, with our own family about 12 years.

Brett Anderson: At what point in that process did you realize that you really did have something special and unique, land that express a very unique character?

Bill Harlan: From the time we acquired the land, planted the vineyard until we sold our first bottle of wine was twelve years. You don't really get a crop for the first two or three years, but starting in 1987, we made our first wine. By the time we got to '90 the fourth vintage, we could see that the wines are really coming along. By '91 they had made another jump. By '94 we were convinced not only could we make good wine, but we had two or three vintages backing it up. By 1996 when we first came to the market,.

Brett Anderson: So you got to a place where you felt like this risk may have paid off.

Bill Harlan: Yes, that's after 12 years of money going in without a nickel of revenue. But then after that, took another eight years before it started to be profitable. But that's really about the second generation.

Bill Harlan: And in a way, Bond began even before Harlan estate because that project evolved out of your experience working with different vintners for so many years in your first project.

Bill Harlan: When we sold the old property, it started out as Santa Helena winery. When we sold that of all those vineyards that we bought fruit from, there was one or two that were head and shoulders above all the others. And so we kept those two vineyards and that was the beginning of Bond. Those vineyards deserved to have their own label. So that was the beginning of Bond. Then we slowly grew Bond over the next decade from two properties to five. And so out of about 100 different vineyards that we bought fruit from and made wine, we were able to capture five, about one in 20.

Brett Anderson: And then Promontory also began early in your wine career to, in a way, because although it took decades before it was realized as a project, you had discovered the land about the same time that you acquired this property in Meadowwood.

Bill Harlan: This property in Meadowwood was seventy nine and eighty. The first time I walked onto the property, which would become Promontory, was in nineteen eighty four. I was hiking in the hills in the western hills of Oakville, assembling land that would be Harlan Estate. But this property wasn't adjacent to that land, and it was much larger. And we weren't even sure at that time if the land in the western hills were going to be as good as we hoped they could be. So over the years I kept my eye on that property, took us 24 years before we were able to acquire it, and before we had really built a team that had the capability of understanding it and before we had produced wine at the quality that we hoped to and even maybe beyond. But we were very fortunate at the time of the depths of recession, really, that property became available. And that was the beginning of Promontory and was also the beginning of the next generation. It was really about the next generation taking on the responsibility of Promontory and in their own way, taking it to what they're working on now, to the potential of Promontory. Of our 200 year plan we put together in 1980. We're now about 40 years into it. And soon it's gonna be their turn.

Brett Anderson: You've been involved in so many other businesses, and I know you were speaking with Robert about cars. And the car world is one where new models come out every year. It's about speed of innovation. With wine, it's such a different, you know, you said it change your perspective on time.

Bill Harlan: But I would say that the change in time perspective happened for me very quickly. Up until that time I was 40, everything was working toward that point of disequilibrium, of not knowing what's going to happen the next fraction of a second. That's where it's very, very exciting to live. To live in that zone it seems like you need to continue to take pretty big risks to keep you in that zone of just living in the moment. So from the time I was 17 until I was 40, I had lived in that world. By the time I was 40 and I went on this trip to see properties that had been in these family's hands for some time, as many as 12 and 14 generations. It just gave you a whole different perspective. The cars do come out every year with a new model, but with where human nature, nature delivers you a new hand every year that we do our best to express the character not only of the place from where the wine comes from, but the time, that growing season.

Robert Ross: Certainly the difference between any automotive manufacturer and what you do in your wine businesses, Bill, is that no automotive manufacturer has a 200 year plan. And I think your vision is clearly one that's strategic, not just for the near-term, but for the long term. But interesting thing, you're a big thinker, you're a long range thinker, but you're also a detail man. And those are interesting characteristics to share in the same mind. Most people don't have that ability. And I look at, for instance, even the labels of your various wines that Harlan Estate, Promontory, Bond. These are amazing things. You're aesthetically driven on every level.

Bill Harlan: Someone to say, well, what is the vision? What is it all about and what are you trying to do? And so work on giving answers to that which this idea of creating a first growth has evolved into creating a domain of producing wines at the very highest level from a few different properties. And I would say the things that they have in common, more have to do with why. The reason why for us is really to, I think over time, we can delight people if we can with a little more depth, we can begin to help enrich their lives, maybe indirectly. And if we can do that at a high enough level to inspire them to maybe going beyond. What I think of as elevating the spirit, and we talked about

these cars. Aesthetically, if you have a car this beautiful, it makes you feel good even when you're not in it. And once you're in a car that you've become at one with it, you just feel great there. So both them are about elevating the spirit. You know, you think about throughout history what has elevated the spirit more than anything else. And it really gets down to art. And so when you think of these fantastic cars you were talking about with Bruce and talking about the Peterson Museum. The automobile is going to be recognized as a work of art. These great automobiles. I think someday wine will be recognized in the realm of art. So if we can be working toward producing something at that level that can have that kind of impact on how people cognitively think about things. But also aesthetically the emotional connection, is really about why we're in this business and how those two relate, I feel.

Robert Ross: Bill and Brett. This was a very rare insight and kind of a special quiet moment to get to really understand the depth behind the wines. Certainly the wines that you produce are remarkable, but I think more remarkable still is the vision behind them and the fact that this vision is certain to endure for not just a century, but centuries and more. Thanks for giving us that insight.

Bill Harlan: Well, thank you, Robert.

Brett Anderson: Thank you, Robert. It's a pleasure to be at the table with you again.

Robert Ross: Well, cheers.

Robert Ross: Thanks to Bill Harlan, Bruce Meyer and Brett Anderson for joining us on Cars that Matter. And thank you to the Harlan family and the Napa Valley Reserve for hosting us. We'll see you next time to continue talking about the passions that drive us and the passions we drive. This episode of Cars that Matter was hosted by Robert Ross, produced by Chris Porter, Sound Engineering by Bill Curtis, Recording and Mastering by Michael Kennedy. Theme Song by Celeste and Eric Dick, recorded at the Napa Valley Reserve. Additional Music and Sound by Chris Porter. Our guests today were Bill Harlan, Bruce Meyer and Brett Anderson. Please like subscribe and share this podcast. I'm Robert Ross. Thanks for listening.

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