

Is It “Real”?

BY PETER BROCK, LEGEND BEHIND BROCK RACING ENTERPRISES



The now classic Shelby Cobra roadster is the most replicated car in history. Copies of Ol’ Shel’s Snakes are now being duplicated in all corners of the world simply because it’s less complicated and far less expensive than trying to acquire one of the few originals. Literally thousands have been reproduced. The fierce competition to excel has forced the shoddiest contenders to fade away.

Real Cobra prices have become so stratospheric that it’s almost pointless to even try and compare on the basis of value. Arguments to justify the reasons why today’s replicas are somehow inferior are equally futile, as the latest versions may look the same, but current improvements prove otherwise. Even though today’s replicas have exterior lines and basic dimensions that vary from make to make, they remain mostly correct. The truth is that many of these modern versions are simply better automobiles.

After some 55 years of constant refinement, they should be. The use of lighter and stronger materials combined with improved redesigned chassis, better construction techniques and enhanced mechanical components leaves little question of superiority. Combine all this with far more powerful, clean-running engines mated to modern five- and six-speed transmissions, and you have to ask, what’s not to like? Prices range from a few thousand for well re-engineered “build it yourself” kits to beautifully finished, turnkey, exact, alloy-bodied replicas in the hundreds of thousands. Take careful aim and choose exactly what you’ve always wanted.

If you still demand an original, you can be certain that they’re still out there at the most prestigious auc-

tions, but since it’s hard to tell a real one from a well-finished copy—and these later replicas will often outperform the best originals—it’s only a matter of personal choice.

Which brings up the question: If you could own something better than an original, would you object on principal that it’s unethical to pretend? Would you feel that it’s somehow morally wrong to own something beautiful simply because it isn’t “real”?

I’ve found these questions seem to fade when you slide into a comfortable leather bucket, fire the engine, and merge onto some smooth, unobstructed blacktop. As much as I love fine design and revere classic lines, I’ve always preferred driving to simply acquiring and owning. The latter scenario works beautifully for something you hang on the wall, but not for something as alive and exciting as a powerful, classic lined sports car.

The legal questions regarding the replication of something of value are important when the design is, indeed, unique and its worth could be diminished by replication, but the fact is that Shelby never did own the original shape of AC’s classic Bristol-engined roadsters, or any of the rights to Ford’s V8 engines and running gear. He simply acquired those components at the time because he could see the immediate potential and it was the fastest and simplest way to enter the car business.

Shelby’s timing was perfect. He was a visionary, but in hindsight he was also rather shortsighted in not realizing the long-term historical significance of what he was creating. At the time of the Cobra’s greatest racing successes, the project was simply the Texan’s personal stepping stone to a larger, far

more exciting and profitable business venture with Ford. Once Shelby had been awarded the lucrative contract to develop and race Ford’s mighty GT40s, the whole Cobra program was scrapped. Almost overnight Shelby’s Snakes became old news.

Again, it seemed like perfect timing for Shelby, but history has a strange way of creating value you can’t buy; it’s called credibility. The thousands of fans who loved his fast, exciting cars and admired what the Texan had done for America wanted a piece of that history, and the replica business took off. Admirably, Shelby was at first both honored and pleased that clubs were formed in his name and that his old Cobras were revered as timeless pieces of rolling art that could be both owned and enjoyed for a reasonable amount.

Much later, though, Shelby looked around and realized the value of what he’d created. After leaving Ford he tried to go back and resurrect his Cobra program, but it was already too late. Too much time had passed; the fact that he’d already willingly endorsed a few of his early acolytes didn’t help. The Cobra name and design had almost become public domain. Instead of embracing those who had improved upon what he’d started, he tried unsuccessfully to put them out of business!

Shelby spent millions on legal wrangling meant to protect what he believed was his, but a Federal judge informed him that all he really owned was the name. As for the diminished value of his originals? One has only to look at recent auction results to prove that replication has had exactly the opposite effect.