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ACCEPT NO IMITATIONS

This vintage Toyota Celica Liftback GT has been transformed from neglected muscle car copycat into a unique rip-roaring tarmac-tearer thanks to its owner's desire to stand out from the crowd...

Words: Dan Furr images: www.mattwoodsphotography.com



It's easy to forget that the groundbreaking designs and innovative technologies that all-conquering Japanese car manufacturers continue to impress upon us follow a chequered history of East Asian automotive development. In fact, a lengthy post-war focus on commercial vehicle production saw the likes of Honda, Nissan and Toyota struggle to keep up with the contemporary designs of American and European motor makers. Unsurprisingly,

this led to the introduction of a number of cars from the Land of the Rising Sun that owe more than a passing nod to their Western counterparts.

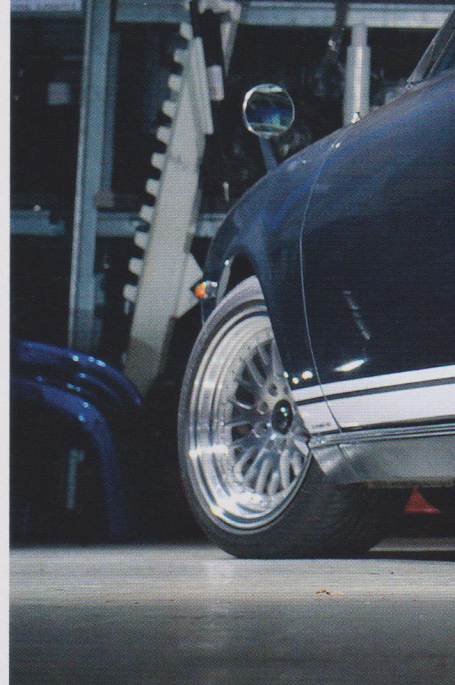
Of course, game changers like the extraordinary Honda NSX, the Lexus LS400 and the full hybrid Toyota Prius are rightly regarded as recent examples of Japan's dominance in the field of envelope pushing, but you only have to journey as far back as the 1970s to see evidence of an age where a light-

fingered approach to aesthetic arrangement was employed by the Pacific's primary peddlers of four-wheeled fun.

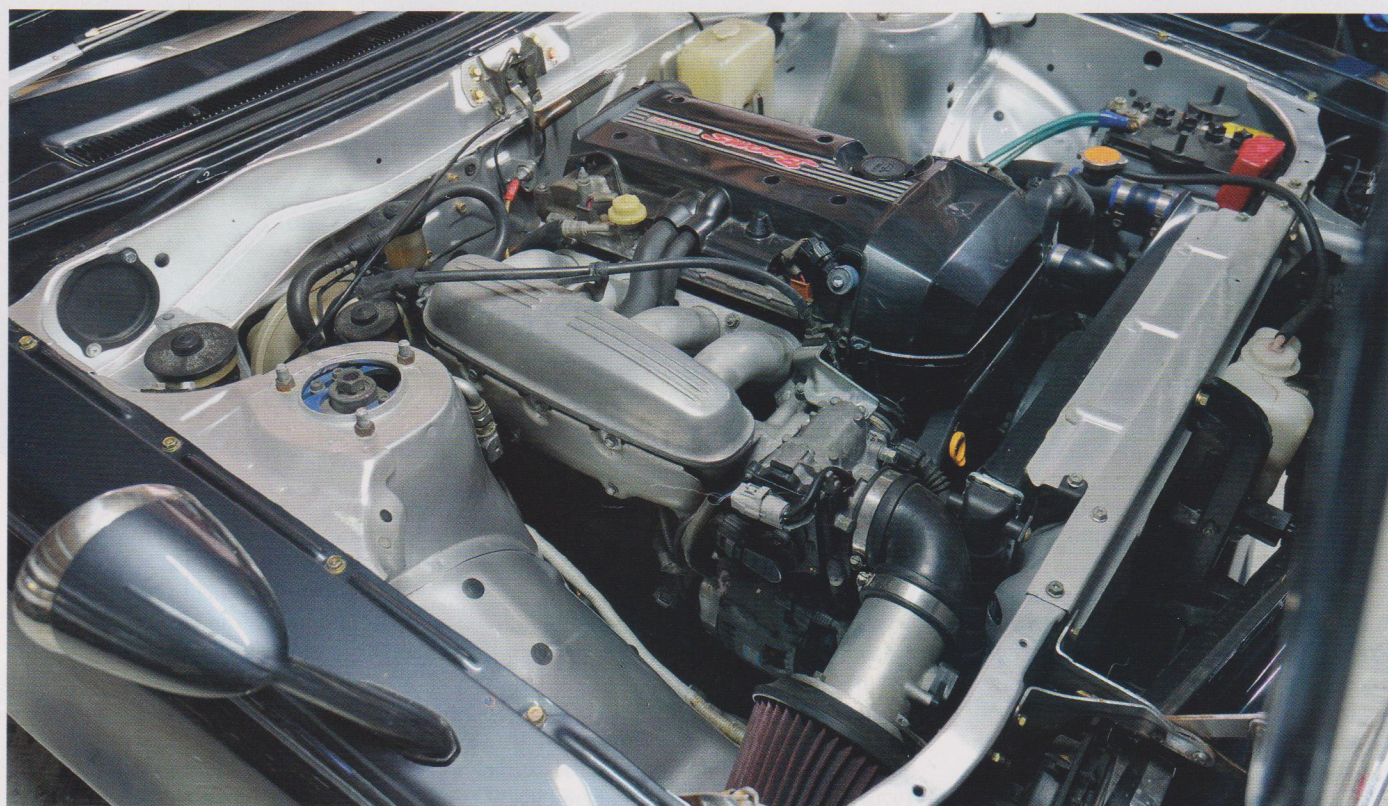
One of the most intriguing designs to emerge from the era can be found in the form of the Toyota Celica TA27 Liftback GT. The car's profile has been unapologetically borrowed from the Ford muscle car stable of the day, and it is often referred to as the 'Japanese Mustang' as a consequence of undeniable similarities with the Pony car



Unashamedly Mustang inspired lines it may have, but the Celica has cut a niche all of its own in the retro scene, and it's hard to argue with such a strong line.



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(just look at those rear lights!). Despite the obvious parallels however, the TA27 managed to forge an identity of its own that has found favour with a whole new generation of petrolheads.

Saj Moghal, proprietor of Crawley-based Jap Performance Parts, is one of a growing number of Liftback lovers. "I was fortunate enough to own a two-litre version in the form of the Celica RA28 GT," he tells us. "I sold that car in order to concentrate on the development of my business, but vowed to build a suitable replacement as soon as time would allow," he says.

Over the past eight years, JPP has grown from a small family run enterprise into one of Europe's largest suppliers of OE JDM second-hand spares and tuning components. Saj imports each and every car that the firm dismantles, reasoning that a lack of exposure to the UK's temperamental weather system ensures that the resulting parts are in excellent condition. "We load up containers full of Evos, Skylines and Imprezas and then ship them over from Japan," he continues. "This means that we are able to supply genuine parts that are in tip-top order. In other words, Japanese car owners don't have to rely on the rot commonly found on eBay!" he laughs.

The huge stockpile of performance orientated machinery at JPP's West Sussex

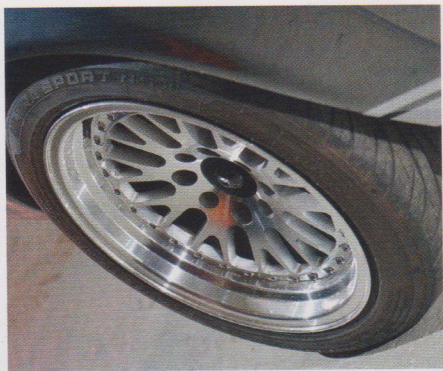
warehouse suggests that Saj was spoilt for choice when it came to planning his new ride. Nevertheless, the sea of engines, gearboxes and complete cars at his disposal were unable to satisfy his requirement for something very cool and very retro. "I spend almost every day assisting clients with the build of phenomenally quick modern motors," he boasts. Those customers have included the producers of the recent *Fast & Furious 6* movie, Mike Brewer of Discovery Channel's *Wheeler Dealers* and various drift teams in search of silverware. "We've supported the development of countless horsepower-hammering racers, but I wanted something that would be capable of putting a huge smile on my face before I'd even turned the key," he grins.

Regretting the sale of the RA28, Saj asked his man-in-Japan to keep an ear to the ground for any Liftback GTs that would serve as a good base for restoration. As luck would have it, a low mileage non-runner soon emerged with over thirty years worth of dinks, dents and a small amount of surface rust to its name! It was nothing if not authentic, and the deal-clincher was the amount of difficult-to-source factory trim that remained present and correct around the car. Thrilled with the find, Saj arranged for the super Celica to be aboard the next boat bound for Blighty.

The JPP team undertook a thorough examination of the car as soon as it arrived on English shores. "We were presented with a 1975 TA27 in black that displayed a lot more corrosion than we had anticipated," groans Saj. "There were some terribly executed bodywork repairs highlighted by evidence of poorly applied filler, not to mention the state of the nearside front end which appeared to have suffered a knock resulting in a damaged wing and valance," he sighs. Subsequently, the car was stripped to a bare shell and the offending panels were either replaced or remodelled using whatever metal was available in JPP's workshop; Saj's father fabricated a brand new headlight panel while sections of a Honda Integra DC2 wing were creatively employed to repair one of the Celica's cosmetically suspect doors.

The car's exterior wasn't the only area in need of attention, and focus was soon shifted to the engine bay. "The TA27 is not about racing, big power or mind-boggling performance," explains Saj. "I already own a 550bhp Nissan Skyline R34 GT-R that satisfies those requirements, but I'd be lying if I said that my intention was to keep the Liftback's factory T2 engine," he smiles.

Despite impressive outings in the Australian Formula Two race cars of the late 'seventies, the Celica's four-cylinder overhead-valve 1.6-litre lump produces considerably less than



100bhp in stock form. That figure may have seemed impressive almost four decades ago, but Saj wanted the car to be able to keep up with the demands of modern traffic when used as his daily driver in the summer months.

It was during a leisurely stroll through his emporium of engines that the solution materialised, although the answer didn't come in the form of any of the units patiently awaiting selection on the shop floor. "I was weighing up the pros and cons of the various running gear configurations in the warehouse when a customer arrived with an accident-damaged Toyota Altezza RS200," he says. The Altezza is the Japanese domestic market's name for the Lexus IS200, and the car was shipped from the factory with the two-litre 'Black Top' 3S-GE Breakthrough Engine with Advanced Mechanism System (BEAMS). The impact suffered by the new arrival hadn't affected its mechanical components, and the JPP crew were immediately encouraged by the suggestion of a transplant of the Altezza's 210bhp engine and accompanying six-speed gearbox into Saj's Liftback GT.

Installing new drivetrain into the Celica's uncompromising shell provided a number of

technical challenges, but Saj's ever-resourceful team cut the entire transmission tunnel out of the donor vehicle and welded it into the TA27. This decisive measure was essential due to the fact that the newer gearbox is much taller than the original unit, and a custom single-piece propshaft (comprising the front half of the Altezza item and the original Celica rear section) has been fabricated to enable an efficient transfer of power to the back end.

The Celica's engine subframe was sufficient enough to accept the 3S-GE, and JPP's ever fruitful storeroom was raided for various brackets that were required to sit alongside bespoke mounts. Modification continued up-front with the tubular exhaust manifold, although the T2's original unit forms the base of the finished header. "We couldn't find a free-flowing manifold that would sit comfortably on the revised setup within the confines of the Celica's engine bay," concedes Saj. "Furthermore, the exhaust ports on the newer engine are much further apart than those on the stock lump. We were forced to remove the flange from the Celica's original manifold and reshape the exposed tube

mouths before welding the Altezza flange on to the resulting pipework," he confirms.

One of many hybrid items that have become a feature of this sleeker Celica, the heat-wrapped manifold joins an APEXi exhaust system lifted from the aforementioned Integra. Predictably, the stainless straight-through failed to escape close scrutiny. "I spent an age playing about with different resonators and the angle of the backbox in a bid to achieve the perfect tone!" chuckles Saj. "I wanted it to sound just like a tuned Celica would have done in period... and then some!"

With its loud, gutsy roar you'd be forgiven for thinking that this TA27 was powered by the kind of V8 beast that its American predecessors are so often associated with, but Mr Moghal is quick to dismiss the suggestion. "It had to be four-cylinders as the aim was to create a Liftback GT that might have rolled off of the Toyota production line if modern engine technologies were available at the time of the car's original release," he says.

As far as the nuts and bolts were concerned, everything was going to plan. Beneath the surface, however, a mammoth effort was





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required to plumb in the Altezza's ECU and wiring loom; Saj considered standalone management to be supplementary to requirements, and roped in JPP's in-house electronics guru, Vit Seebaluck, to meet the challenge of retro-fitting the RS200's brain.

Vit hadn't anticipated just how much of a headache he would suffer when trying to wire the Celica's original dials and mechanical levers into contacts intended for nifty modern switches, but light relief was found thanks to the inclusion of a Mk4 Supra tacho and rev counter. Remarkably, everything works as it should (even the vintage head unit!) which is a testament to the time and skill that has been invested in updating this quality retro ride. But the story doesn't end there...

Focus soon returned to the Liftback's exterior, and Saj imported an OE boot spoiler and rare front lip from Japan. A wide-arch bodykit was also on the cards, but this seemed like sacrilege after so much time and effort had been spent perfecting the bodywork. Instead, the colour of the car became the hot topic of conversation at JPP HQ, and an initial suggestion of white soon made way for a stunning Mercedes AMG shade of grey. Additionally, custom side stripes that boast a unique BEAMS GT logo on each lower rear quarter panel tease keen-eyed enthusiasts with a hint at what lies under the bonnet, and an exposed oil cooler earns the car a few extra JDM 'scene points'.

The choice of wheels was another careful

consideration, and Saj opted for rarely-seen Vaarstoen 15-inchers with stretched rubber in place of the factory hoops. The rims are one of the only elements of the build that weren't salvaged from the JPP parts bin, although the same can't be said of the stunning Honda S2000 half-leather interior that populates the cabin. The seats are in mint condition and hold Saj firmly in place when his foot is planted squarely into the adopted Nissan Skyline shagpile!

With the Liftback project completed – including Japanese show plates slapped on to each end of the car – Saj is once again busying himself with customer builds. He does indicate that he has been helping Vit's brother with an impressive Celica GT-Four rally car assembly, and we wonder if this signals a desire to take the TA27 out on to the nation's race circuits. “Not a chance!” he roars. “The suspension is nowhere near as sophisticated as a modern car despite the incorporation of Cusco coilovers. Besides, I built the GT because of its ability to make me smile as opposed to what it can do on a track,” he reasons.

Saj has breathed a new lease of life into this once disregarded Japanese classic. Moreover, the fact that it wears its design influences so blatantly is of no concern to the hordes of admirers that drool over its flawless paintwork, marvel at its ability to cover ground at a blistering rate and who enjoy the uncharacteristically explosive exhaust eruption. Put simply, this BEAMS-powered Celica TA27 Liftback GT is no imitator – it's in a league of its own. *RC*

Engine: 3S-GE BEAMS 1998cc 16-valve Dual VVT-i, Altezza wiring harness and ECU, Altezza in-tank fuel pump, VW Polo radiator, Mishimoto slimline radiator fan, APEXi induction kit, heat-wrapped custom exhaust manifold, APEXi Honda Integra DC2 modified exhaust system, silicone hoses

Transmission: J160 6-speed manual gearbox, Altezza transmission tunnel, custom propshaft

Suspension: Cusco coilovers (front), Skyline R33 GT-R rear springs, modified steering bars, camber adjustment kit

Brakes: 220mm vented discs (front), original drum brakes (rear), performance pads, calipers painted red

Wheels: 8x15-inch (front) and 9x15-inch (rear) Vaarstoen V3 alloys, Nankang Ultra Sport 195/50/15 tyres (front), Bridgestone B530 215/45/15 tyres (rear), lightweight Grayston Motorsport wheel nuts painted black

Exterior: Full respray in Mercedes AMG Tenorite Grey, JDM remodelled front lip and rear spoiler, fibreglass bonnet, custom side stripes with BEAMS GT graphics, Jap Performance Parts sunstrip, exposed oil cooler and braided hoses, bespoke headlight panel

Interior: Honda S2000 front seats, modified seat rails, original Celica rear bench, Skyline R32 GT-R carpets, Mk4 Supra tacho and rev counter, rally-spec single speed heater, Evo VIII gear gaiter, Impreza STi gearknob, Nardi steering wheel, Altezza pedals, Celica factory radio and speakers

Shout: Saj would like to thank Customize Bodyworkz for the paint, Lee from Crawley Autofit for the welding and Vit at Jap Performance Parts for his patience when it came to the wiring!

specification