

# RICE ROCKETS

**DROPPING A RUN IN A FOUR-BANGER**  
WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY TIM HONG

**IT'S 9:30** on a Sunday night in October at a Shell gas station in eastern New Orleans. Most other nights of the week here are much like any other gas station in America. But Sunday nights in east New Orleans are race nights. Scores of racers gather here before heading out to the make shift improvised drag strip further down Chef Menteur Hwy, just past the little Saigon area of the city. This is the pre-party before the main event, where racers and enthusiasts gather to socialize, talk shit, scope out each other's rides, show off their latest body kits, rock their subwoofers, bounce their cars into the air through special customized hydraulics, and marvel at the work and craftsmanship of their fellow racers' rides. It's a relatively diverse youthful crowd representing plenty of women as well as men, Blacks, Asians, and white folks. The Asians are rockin their 4-cylinder import Civics and Integras while the white folks tend to stick to their domestic V8 muscle cars of choice, the Mustang and the Camaro.

By 10:00, the cars have started flowing out of the Shell and onto the streets, revving their engines and anticipating the coming race. It's a sight to see this armada of radical and aggressively styled race machines pouring out into the streets. Everyone is making their way towards the racing strip. The races have just started and already there are over 100 cars and more than 300 people here to race, spectate, and

socialize with fellow import enthusiasts. Similar gatherings are taking place all over America, where APA's have revitalized drag racing culture into a distinctly Asian American cultural phenomenon.

## HISTORY

The influence is unmistakable. Chinese lettering, dragons, and tigers are popular decals for import racecars. Asian women monopolize the import model subculture. Previously, the drag racing scene had been dominated by American rear wheel drive muscle cars powered by large block V8 engines. Models like the Camaro, Mustang, and Corvette have built their reputations by dominating the streets with blistering quarter mile times since the 1960's. But by the mid to late 80's, a completely different brand of racecar started hitting the streets of California. The Honda Civic CRX (1984-1991) was a very small two-seat economy car with a tiny 4-cylinder engine designed for maximum fuel efficiency (67 miles per gallon on the highway). It's name, CRX, stood for Civic Renaissance Model X. It was aptly named, as this was the vehicle that would spark the Asian racing revolution.

The CRX was the complete antithesis of the American muscle car. A small 2-seater, it came with the choice of a 1.3 liter or 1.5 liter 4-cylinder engine. With front wheel drive, it had zero conventional appeal for street racing. The original CRX Asian racers saw things differently. These Asian kids generally



came from lower to lower middle class backgrounds in urban and suburban California. In the CRX, they saw a lightweight pocket racer waiting to happen. With a little tuning, the CRX could capitalize on its significant power-to-weight ratio advantage. Asian kids saw their own spirits embodied in the potential of the car.

## EVOLUTION

"We chose these cars because they're just like us," said Tony Nguyen, a 24 year old import racer who has gone from an 11-year-old runaway and school dropout to successful entrepreneur with 2 race cars, as well as a Nissan Maxima and Lexus coupe. Tony found the import scene through friends and credits it as giving him something to do to stay out of trouble. Tony races a 1994 Acura Integra with a 2000 model conversion. He bought the car for \$12,000 three years ago and has since invested another \$20,000 in custom racing parts. His Honda Civic is currently in the shop undergoing a motor swap. He expects to break the 11 second quarter mile barrier after finishing his modifications. Combined, he estimates he has invested \$40,000 of customized work into his two import racecars.

"We race Hondas because we have something to prove. It's fun to smoke white people in their Mustangs who just can't believe they've just been burned by an Asian in a Civic" says Michael Tran, a 26-year-old racer, mechanic, import show promoter, and entrepreneur from eastern New Orleans. Like Tony, Michael first started racing with a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Acura Integra before settling into his 1999 Porsche 911.

Michael and Tony in many ways represent the evolution of import racing from an underground subculture into a pop phenomenon. In the beginning of the movement, very little money was being invested in serious competitive racing. It mostly took a hand-me-down from mom and dad and plenty of weekend elbow grease to fashion a respectable 4-cylinder racecar. But as the subculture has merged into pop consciousness, corporate interests have taken note. These days corporations have been expressing their economic interest in the import scene by investing large sums of money through sponsorships, promotions, and flashy marketing. "The biggest difference between now and the old days is the amount of money you need to be taken seriously" says Tim Eberts, a local mechanic who's been tuning import racecars since the early 90's.

Some racers are increasingly troubled over the commercialization of the import scene. Commercial-

ization invariably tends to lead towards appropriation and assimilation. Exhibit A might be Rob Cohen's feature film "The Fast and the Furious" whose plot was built around Import racing culture only to see Asian Americans take a backseat role in the film as either insignificant background or only to serve as the requisite evil Asian villain (Rick Yune as "Johnny Tran") and gang of thugs. "The Fast and the Furious" is almost universally panned by the Import racers I've spoken with. The sequel is currently wrapping up shooting in Miami. From all reports, it sounds to be more of the same.

## CRITICISM, QUESTIONS, AND COMMENTARY

The most common criticism of the Import scene is usually tied to the gender implications of roles where women as most often represented by sexualized models standing next to racecars. "I hate the way they portray women as these objects just like their cars" says Katherine Lucero, a Philipina senior from DePaul University in Chicago, voicing a popular objection to the politics of the Import scene. But Import model Loan Nguyen counters, "Yeah, I can see why the haters would say those things. But what about Rock music? What about Rap and Hip Hop? What about movies and Hollywood? Are we any worse than they are? Why single us out?"

There has been particularly critical commentary from Asian American activists over the cultural paradoxes embraced by an Asian Import scene that promotes "aZn pRyde", yet seemingly contradicts itself with cultural standards that favor blond hair over black, blue eyes over brown, and exaggerated breast size from the most popular Asian import models sporting this conventional import model aesthetic, as if they are in fact "de-asianizing" themselves and therefore lost in a shallow cultural sensibility.

Asian American activist and spoken word poet Giles Li questions the depth of this kind of cultural sensibility amongst Asian Import racers in his poem, "The Fast and the Curious" with lines like:

"but you keep telling me that you're keeping it real./chinese language decals that you can't even read/and you're keeping it real"

and

"my, what big eyes you have/have they been surgically altered?/my, what a big head you have/do you really enjoy being that stereotype?/my, what big balls you have/to portray my people /your people as shallow and lifeless"

Li's criticisms are especially interesting coming from a well established APA spoken word poet, as the spo-

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I contemplate it in silence the rest of the drive home. 

By 10:30 on this isolated stretch of road in eastern New Orleans, the races are just beginning to get into full gear. But suddenly everyone seems to be scattering for their cars all at once. Glancing around, I am

By Clarissa Wong

The recent online web journal phenomenon XANGA has left me feeling even more confused than ever. [To those who do not know what xanga is, it is a journal open to the eyes of everyone. Your xanga site could be found through random searches for similar "hobbies" and "expertise", or could be found by your friend typing in your screen name. I guess xanga could also be seen as a place to find common interests, because you can belong to different "blog rings".] So I was "surfing the xanga", procrastinating as usual, and I come across these blog rings: Azn Pryde, Chinese Pride, Asian Diaspora etc. Intrigued, I click onto these blog rings and scroll down to see the who joined these rings, and I get names like, "Azn\_CuTie", "pHatAzN", "AznShoRty", "Azn Brick Wall," and even "Chinkylicious!" People, people, people! Here we are complaining that Americans keep on stereotyping Asian Americans, but yet we call ourselves "chinkylicious." Why, do you think, that these people feel obligated to incorporate "azn" into their screen name? Does putting the term "Asian" (or rather, "azn") as aliases make them feel more Asian? Does it show Asian pride? Or does it just enable us to find other people with "Asian" whatever and assimilate?

I think it's hard to fit in. Asians who try to fit into a "white" society are called "sell outs". Those who try to be all "gangsta" and "up in your face" are called "wanna-be-blacks". Those who act out their roots are called "fobs". So how can we be, without any added stereotypes, "Just Asian?"

