

## INDUSTRY MAVERICK HE NEVER FIT PICTURE OF AUTO EXECUTIVE

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When mavericks of the auto industry are mentioned, one name always makes the list: **John Z. DeLorean**.

Like Henry J. Kaiser, Preston Tucker and Malcolm Bricklin, he tried to produce his own car. Like them, he failed.

Those three names were always linked with his. There were other names, too, in the recent heady years when **DeLorean** was touting his gull-winged, stainless-steel namesake as a car that would never rust, a car that would last 25 years. And they were rarely kind.

"All he wants is to become the **John** Travolta of the business," one industry observer, asking anonymity, told the Washington Star in 1979.

His life-style -- during and after his meteoric rise through the General Motors ranks -- has indeed seemed to belong to a Hollywood celebrity instead of an organization man. He did not fit the pin-striped, dull-gray stereotype of the GM executive, even when his name was bandied about as the odds-on choice to become president of the company before he stunned the industry by resigning in 1973.

Once the escort of Joey Heatherton, Candice Bergen and Ursula Andress, **DeLorean** has been married three times. He divorced his first wife, Elizabeth, in 1969 to marry then-20-year-old Kelly Harmon, daughter of former University of Michigan football star Tom Harmon. The second marriage lasted until 1972. In 1973, he wed top model Cristina Ferrare, his current wife. They met through their mutual divorce lawyer.

**DeLOREAN**, 57, is a self-described "health nut," keeping his 6-foot-4 frame in shape with weights. His gray, wavy hair once was dyed black. He favors designer suits.

His Fifth Avenue duplex in New York, with the marble staircase and the 17th Century French antiques, is hundreds of miles and a world away from his childhood home on Detroit's near east side.

**DeLorean** began his fast-moving career, armed with a bachelor of science degree from the Lawrence Institute of Technology in Southfield, as an engineer in GM's Pontiac Division. His first day was Sept. 1, 1956.

He found a mentor in Semon E. (Bunkie) Knudsen, then head of the division. **DeLorean** became head of the division himself and moved rapidly to become general manager of the Chevrolet Division, then group executive for the car and truck group.

HE WAS 48 when he attained the car and truck helm, which meant the five American car divisions, GMC Truck & Coach and Canadian car and truck divisions reported to him.

That entitled him to an office on the coveted Fourteenth Floor -- a location mentioned only in reverent tones by company insiders -- and \$650,000 in salary and bonus.

**DeLorean** headed the brain trust behind a line of high- performance GM cars, the Pontiac GTO and the 1967 Firebird, both hot sellers. He also developed the Chevrolet Monte Carlo.

For **DeLorean** , that wasn't enough. In J. Patrick Wright's book, "On A Clear Day, You Can See General Motors," **DeLorean** is quoted as saying he began to believe that corporate decisions were unimaginative and, in some cases, immoral.

And he chafed at GM's rigid, unwritten code of personal conduct. He described it in Wright's book as requiring attendance at company dinners, blue and black suits (no brown) and endless yesmanship .

ON APRIL 2, 1973, he quit.

He said he was going to build the car that Detroit could have built but didn't. He said he was going to produce his dream car: fast, sleek, long-lasting and safe, equipped with the air bags that the Big Three have resisted. It was going to be expensive, with a price tag of \$25,000.

After negotiating with Detroit and Puerto Rico, he settled on Northern Ireland as the site for his new factory.

He said his company, by locating there, would not be working against established traditions in the auto field, and the labor costs -- about \$4 an hour compared to Detroit's \$14 an hour -- were attractive.

HE HAD CONVINCED others that his plan would work -- entertainer Johnny Carson, for one, and about 499 others who invested a total of \$180 million in his car. The British government guaranteed about \$100 million in financing.

He recruited top talent to his operation -- his president was a former Chrysler vice-president; his engineering director had held that post with Aston Martin Lagonda Ltd. in England.

But he warned potential investors on the first page of his company's prospectus: "This investment involves a high degree of risk and should be considered only by those who can afford a total loss . . . "

"A lot of guys would like to do it on their own," he mused in a 1979 interview as he prepared to launch the company . "But they don't have the courage to take a shot."

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