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SA EXCLUSIVE:

BULLITT

MCQUEEN'S MOVIE
MUSTANG BACK ON SET



BUGATTI TYPE 35B

ENGINEERED ELEGANCE AND SUCCESS

PEUGEOT 504

AFRICA'S LIONHEART STILL GOING AT 50

NISSAN FIGARO

THE CZECH MOTOR INDUSTRY

VOLKSWAGEN TYPE 3





HOMECOMING QUEEN



For many of us, there is a specific car that influenced our childhood – could be anything from a Matchbox miniature to a movie star. Iconic automotive movie roles cover everything from Herbie to James Bond’s Aston Martin, but nothing has had a greater impact on the silver screen and **Axel E. Catton** than Steve McQueen’s 1968 Ford Mustang GT390 Fastback from the movie *Bullitt*. In just 10 minutes and 53 seconds, the car chase through the streets of San Francisco established itself as the benchmark for an entire genre epitomised by the likes of *The French Connection* and *Ronin*.

Photography by Morgan Segal





was ten years old when Bullitt etched itself permanently into my mind: the chase, the sound of those gear changes and the many hubcaps (six) flying off that jet-black Dodge Charger. You can imagine the feeling when I recently took that call from Bullitt's owner, Sean Kiernan... would I like to be the only writer in the world to be invited to San Francisco to witness

Sean agreed to drive his Mustang – although currently not road registered – one last time through the streets of San Francisco, albeit not as dramatically as in 1968

Bullitt returning to the original movie locations for one time only? Of course I would! On my way to San Francisco I reminisced about those iconic scenes.

The movie's automotive protagonists were considered lost for more than 40 years – until January of this year when Sean, whose family has owned Bullitt for 44 years, drove his car on stage at the Detroit Auto Show in the presence of Steve McQueen's granddaughter, Molly. Since then, he has brought it everywhere from Detroit to Goodwood. But for us, he returned to the place where Bullitt became legend. Sean agreed to drive his Mustang – although currently not road

registered – one last time through the streets of San Francisco, albeit not as dramatically as in 1968.

The movie's leading man, Hollywood star and racing driver Steve McQueen, saw the car chase as one of the crucial elements of the film, which was the first of a series that his own company, Solar Productions, produced for Warner Brothers. McQueen was aiming for an authentic movie experience and had the chase scenes filmed in real time. For 10 minutes and 53 seconds all eyes are on the cars dashing through the city at speeds upwards of 110mph. With no music or dialogue to distract the viewer, images cut in fast succession from inside to outside, from wide-angle to close-up – a revolutionary approach for 1968. So



much so that it earned cutter Frank Keller an Oscar. McQueen hired Englishman Peter Yates as director after seeing his work on an equally striking car chase through the city of London in Yates's movie *Robbery*.

McQueen and stunt coordinator Carey Loftin invited stuntman Bud Ekins to join the team. Ekins had started his career doubling for McQueen in motorcycle jumps for *The Great Escape*. Max Balchowsky from Hollywood Motors in Los Angeles was tasked with building two cars with sequential VIN numbers, referred to as 558 and 559.

Once filming was over, both cars were considered lost for decades... until 2017, when the chassis and assorted parts of 558 turned up in California. However, 559 had not been seen for 40 years – until now. 558 was

scheduled for the legendary jumps on the corner of Taylor and Filbert Street and fitted with a roll cage. Bud Ekins drove 558 in the movie, while all scenes that showed Steve McQueen at the wheel were filmed using 559. Most of the driving scenes were shot using 559 after 558 was heavily damaged during the jumps. Nerd alert: whenever McQueen is driving, inside shots show his face in the rear-view mirror. When Ekins is behind the wheel, the mirror is tilted.

Both McQueen and Balchowsky wanted the car to have a mean look. The Highland Green body (wrongly called British racing green in the *Road &*

Track advert) was stripped of the clear coat to reduce reflections – something that makes it even more difficult today for Sean to preserve the car in its current state. "I had to cover the entire car in hydrophobic paste to minimise environmental impact," admits Sean.

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The rear fascia was painted black and stripped of all lettering, the reversing lights are gone and so is all the chrome, save for a tiny strip along the top end of the trunk. There is also no pony at the front for the same reason. Both the underside of the car as well as the engine compartment still bear signs of where the cameras were mounted, while the trunk still has a huge exhaust hole for the generator used to power the cameras. "I know some folks have hinted at a smoke machine being back here, but it was always only a generator," insists Sean.

Engine work was similarly extensive. The 390cid engine (6.4 litres) got a different cam, a polished cylinder head and a larger exhaust manifold from a truck. "Not so much for more power but for more torque at lower revs," explains Sean. Balchowsky also added an Autolite carburettor, which the car still has to this day.

The sound is real, confirms Sean, but it was recorded and added later, which would also explain the odd double-clutch noise. We can only assume that the gas generator in the back was making such a racket that real-time audio was useless.

The book on which the movie was based – *Mute Witness* – is set in New York. However, Yates placed the movie in San Francisco as the mayor wanted to establish the city as a competitor to LA for movie sets. In the end, the crew had four weeks to shoot the entire chase, with anything up to 60 blocks cordoned off at a time. McQueen was a perfectionist and had all the takes done as often as necessary to achieve exactly the look he was going for.

Speculation on the whereabouts of 559 never really ceased, with numerous cars presented as the 'real Bullitt' ending up being fakes of varying quality. All this changed when Ford launched the 2019 edition of the Bullitt Mustang on 14 January 2018 at the Detroit Motor Show. Steve's granddaughter Molly McQueen was also on hand to present Sean Kiernan and his real Bullitt – 559. Ever since, Sean has been touring the world with support from the Ford Motor Company and America's Historic Vehicle Association.

When Kiernan and Bullitt were scheduled to return to San Francisco for the press test drives of the new model, Sean asked me if I would like to come a day early as the world's only writer to witness his car taking on the

original chase locations one more time.

On a cloudy Sunday morning, photographer Morgan Segal and I wait for Bullitt on the corner of Chestnut and Taylor Street in San Francisco's North Beach district. This is where the chase scene began. To our left, stuntman Bill Hickman fastens the seat belt in his jet-black Dodge Charger. Moviegoers saw the Charger dash up Chestnut Street, with Bullitt unable to follow because of traffic blocking his way on Taylor. In the background on Columbus Avenue was a huge sign for Bimbo Club 365, one of the few movie remnants still visible to this day.

On cue, a black Ford F-350 Super Duty pick-up (what else?) shows up towing a long nondescript trailer – turns out Sean handles all transport himself. Because it's a Sunday, Sean can park his trailer directly on Chestnut. Even though he must surely feel the weight of this moment on his shoulders, he doesn't let on what it means to him. "Of course, she's insured. But the registration, well, we're waiting for the papers at this very moment, so let's not make too much noise, shall we?" Wait a minute, 'she'? "Sure, Bullitt's a 'she', always has been," he laughs.

Sean opens the trailer – and I can see Bullitt for the first time in real life. Here, in San Francisco. To call this a high point in my automotive career would be an understatement. Sean quickly starts up that glorious V8. Oh my God, it sounds exactly like in the movie! But it's not until all six rear lights come on that it really hits home what's actually happening. This is not just any car or just any location, this here is the Holy Grail for car aficionados! Sean still comes over as if this is something he does every day.

He drives over to an empty parking space at the side of the road. Time for us to take in the car we have admired so often on TV. Anybody not knowing what this is about might mistake the GT for a wreck. The paint is dull, the fenders and the rear bumper are rusty. But for us, a childhood dream is coming true. On the backseat I notice a cover. "This has to be with the car at all times," Sean insists, "If there is even one drop of rain in the air, you have to throw it over the car, whether I'm in it or not." Morgan and I realise what we're dealing with here. This isn't a restored car; this is a job for a conservationist. Sean Kiernan: curator,

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custodian. How did he end up with this car?

After filming was over, 559 was sold – still bearing its original movie scars – to Robert Ross, a Warner Brothers employee. Ross soon sold it on to New Jersey Police Detective Frank Marranta, who kept it until 1974. It was advertised in *Road & Track* with only five lines, not even a picture. Sean's father, Robert Kiernan, bought it as the family car to replace an ageing MGB GT. "Initially, my dad was looking for a GT350," explains Sean. "This car was clearly advertised as the one from the movie, so we were never in any doubt that it's the real deal. In those days, movie cars weren't such a big thing. My dad loved it mainly for its power and handling. In the seventies, my mom Robbie drove it to work at a Catholic school. She always said the nuns could hear her from afar and said: 'Ah, that's Robbie.'"

In 1977, the family received a letter from Steve McQueen, whose marriage to Ali McGraw (*Convoy*) was on the rocks. Steve wanted to gather around him the things that

were important in his life. He was looking to buy 'his' Mustang back, with 'buying' not entirely the correct term here. "He didn't want to pay anything but offered to find us a suitable replacement. My dad politely declined," says Sean with a happy grin.

In 1980, Bullitt went into storage at the Kiernan's New Jersey home after a clutch malfunction. "My dad then bought a 1981 Plymouth Horizon – a car I also still own." Over the decades, Bullitt remained under cover with knowledge of its existence fading. "For us, she was always there. She has been part of the family for longer than I've been around," explains Sean, who was born in 1981. He and his father Rob shared a love for all things automotive, especially Mustangs. Their last experience together was a visit to a local Cars & Coffee event four years ago. "The next day he was dead – suddenly and unexpectedly – at the age of just 66 years," explains his son.

Meanwhile, on location in San Francisco, the experienced owner is feeling the magnitude of the moment getting to him. "My dad and I always wanted to put Bullitt back on the road," he says, "but over the years, we never got around doing it." The resurrection of this car is more than just the revival of a legend. For the public,

this has always been Steve McQueen's Mustang. But for Sean, this is first and foremost his dad's car.

The photographer is ready to go and so is Sean. Despite the fact that we're not making a movie, so speed and sound are not being recorded, Sean steps on the gas as if the cameras were rolling. "I couldn't resist," he says, "I just had to hear that sound." Next, we're on Filbert Street coming down Larkin, with Alcatraz in the background. In the movie, the sequence of locations makes no real sense at all. Later in the chase, the cars are in the south on 20th Street, then they are on the way to the Golden Gate Bridge but don't go over it. A continuity issue, just like the six hubcaps the Charger loses during the scenes and the little green VW Beetle that shows up again and again.

Our last location is 1153 Taylor, Lt. Frank Bullitt's house. By now it's noon and dozens of tourists have shown up, witnessing the car and Morgan. Sean is noticeably nervous; there are too many cars and people around who could cause damage. The owner calls it a day. Bullitt's homecoming is over.

As Sean closes the trailer's tailgate, he says something that puts everything in perspective. At the car's reveal at the Detroit Motor Show in January, Molly McQueen said to him: "Steve would like what you're doing with the car. It's in good hands with you guys." 📸

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