

## My Ride in the Iconic Bullitt Car, Well Almost

*By Irv Sternberg*

There was no background music for the chase scene. The car's engine provided the "music."

It's been fifty years since movie goers were first blown away by the 1968 Ford Mustang 390 GT S-Code fastback, reverentially referred to as "the Bullitt car" because it was the car driven by Steve McQueen in the 1968 movie *Bullitt* featuring what has been called the very best car chase ever filmed.

I'm not a devoted lover of old cars but I do recall that movie with fondness. So when I learned that the car stored under a tarpaulin in the underground garage space I was renting was a '68 Mustang 390GT, I grew curious. I wanted to learn more.

Since its movie debut, the iconic car has had a quiet, reclusive history. Its acting career over, the car was sold to a police detective in 1971 with a letter from the Ford company certifying that it had been purchased by Solar Productions, McQueen's company, for the movie. And then it seemingly disappeared.

But it reappeared in 1990 when an auto magazine reported it was owned by Robert Kiernan of Madison, N.J., where it was frequently seen on the streets of that middle-class suburban community about 25 miles from Manhattan. McQueen tried to buy the car back but failed. Kiernan, like McQueen, was a car lover. The Bullitt car had captured his heart and he could not let it go. He had purchased the car at an auction for \$6,000. Its original price was \$3,500.

Actually, McQueen's production company had purchased two Mustangs. Both were used in the filming. But the second Mustang took a beating in the movie and was dispatched to the crusher. Apparently, someone intervened because it was found years later in a junk yard. Attempts to restore it involved so many changes, the car lost its collectible value. Not so the other Mustang. Movie goers will recall when the brand new Highland Green sports car with a V8 engine was pursued by a Dodge Charger up and down the streets of San Francisco for ten nerve-wracking minutes.

A stickler for details, McQueen had ordered changes in the auto. He removed the conventional badges and backup lights and had Gray Torq Thrust wheels replace the original wheels, apparently to give the car a meaner, tougher look. But despite his desire to drive the car in the chase scene, that job fell to a stunt man, apparently out of concern for McQueen's safety.

Keenly aware of its marketing value, the Ford Company continues to roll out new versions of the Mustang every few years. A half-century after its birth, the 2018 Mustang was displayed in January at the Detroit Auto Show. Alongside it was the original Bullitt car, still ready to kill those San Francisco hills

The car is now owned by Robert Kiernan's son, Sean, who wants to build replicas of it and sell them at auction to raise funds for Parkinson's research, the disease that took his father's life.

Auto enthusiasts have said about the '68 Mustang fastback that it is "the car version of the ark of the covenant."

McQueen told friends he considered the car a character in the film, not a prop.

As for the car stored in my rented parking space, the owner took me for a ride in his coveted '68 Mustang, not Highland Green but blue. We sped down I-25 as other drivers gawked. For a few moments, I was Steve McQueen careening and cornering those twisty turns on San Francisco's streets.