

The image is a book cover for 'Hot Wheels Classics: The Redline Era' by Angelo Van Bogart. The background is a vibrant, stylized cityscape at night, with blurred lights and buildings. A large, orange, curved track element dominates the foreground, curving upwards and then downwards. A blue classic car is shown driving up the curve of the track. At the top of the track, the iconic Hot Wheels logo is displayed in its signature flame font, with the word 'Hot' in red and 'Wheels' in yellow. Below the logo, the title 'Classics' is written in a large, white, sans-serif font, and 'The Redline Era' is written in a smaller, yellow, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the track, a green classic car is shown driving down the curve. The author's name, 'Angelo Van Bogart', is printed in a small, white, sans-serif font at the bottom center of the cover.

Hot Wheels

# Classics

## The Redline Era

Angelo Van Bogart



**Classics**  
**The Redline Era**



**Angelo Van Bogart**

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# Dedication

For Ryan Gilman, Tom Bartsch and Jeremy Tietz, the good friends who help me get into just enough trouble to keep life interesting.

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# Acknowledgments

The passion for Hot Wheels cars burns strong with many collectors, and a small but important few helped bring this book together. Foremost were the Mattel designers, past and present, who took time from their busy schedules to recall their thoughts on these toys and share their memories for this book. Without them, it's difficult to imagine a die-cast car world as exciting as many of us have experienced since our youth and into our adulthood.

The collections of several people made this book a visual feast of vintage Hot Wheels. The collections of fellow Hot Wheels collectors Mark Meredith, Colin Bruce III, Pete Cambio, Annie Smith, Edward Wershbale, Tom Michael and Bob Whaley are the source for many of the great Hot Wheels cars included in this book. For opening their collections to me and our photographers, I am deeply indebted.

Finally, the photographs in this book are largely the handiwork of Kris Kandler, a photographer with the patience and vision to capture Hot Wheels with a fresh eye each time she points her camera towards them. For her professionalism in every endeavor through which I have worked with Kris, I offer my deepest appreciation.

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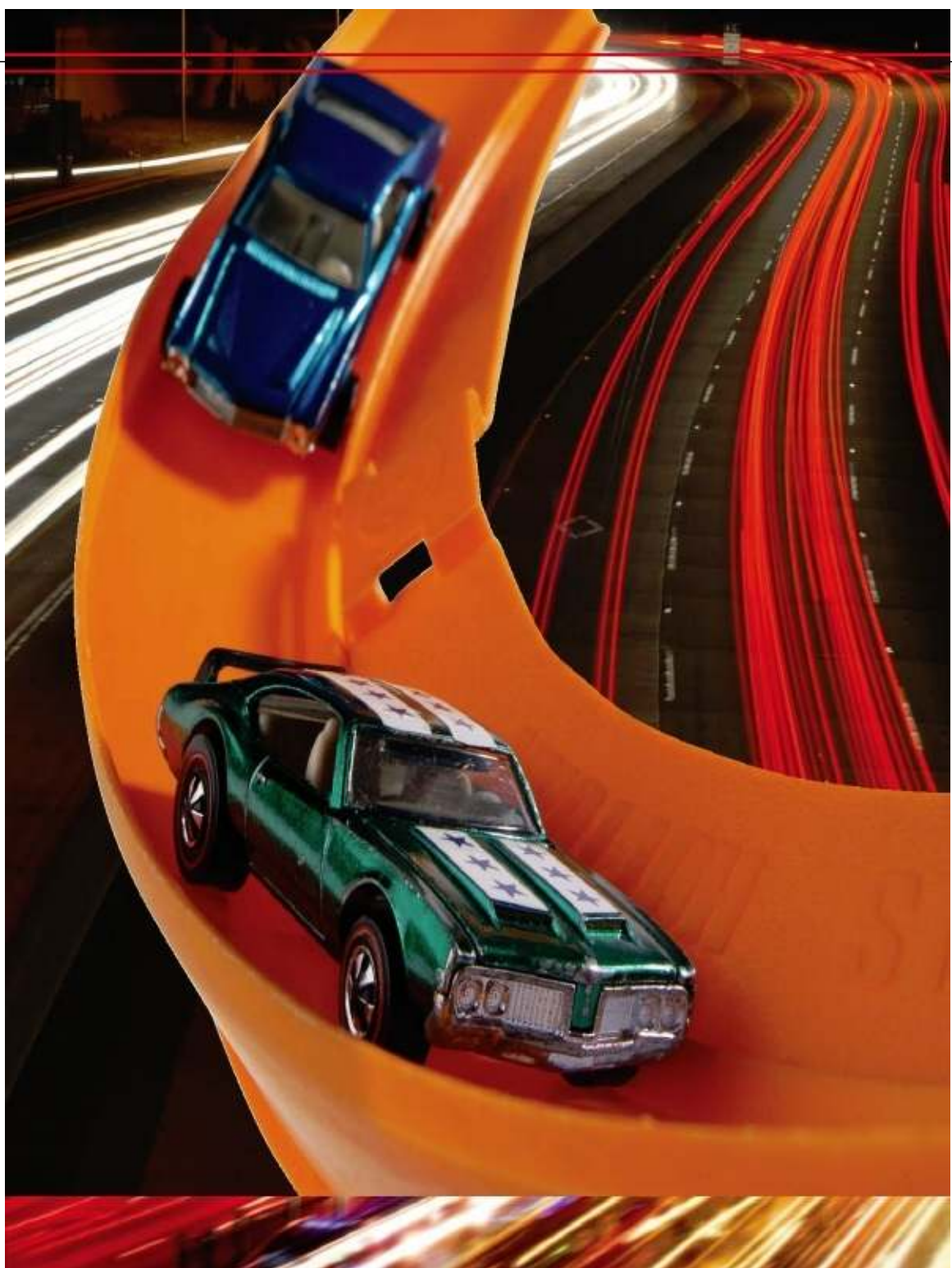
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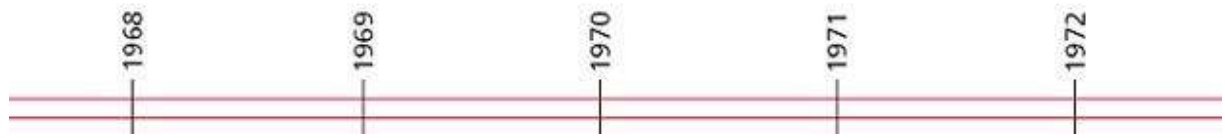
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# The Life and Times of the Redline Era



## ● 1968

The Custom Camaro rocks the die-cast toy world as part of the Sweet 16, the first run of Hot Wheels cars that sets in motion one of the most successful toy lines in history.



## ● 1969

The Volkswagen Beach Bomb, a nod to the California surfing culture, is the hottest casting to come out of 1969 as Mattel expands its Hot Wheels line from 16 to 40 castings.



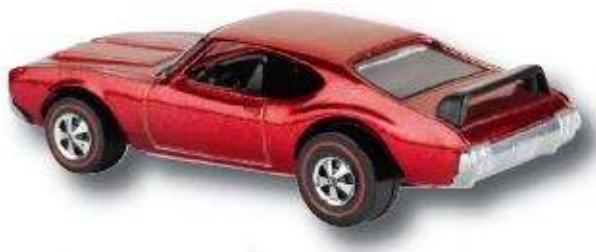
## ● 1970

Based on the fabulous and sporty 1955 Chevrolet Nomad, Mattel's ultra-cool Classic Nomad highlights a year that also saw the introduction of the Heavyweights series.



## ● 1971

One of the most collectible castings introduced in the Redline era, the Larry Wood-designed Oldsmobile 442 stands out as the year's lone realistic muscle car.



## ● 1972

Open Fire, the AMC Gremlin-influenced casting, is one of only seven new releases in 1972, the last year of the vibrant, candy-colored Spectraflame era.



## ● 1973

Enamel paint and the start of massive reissues dominate the year when only three new castings are released, including the Larry Wood-designed Sweet 16.



## ● 1974

Pad-printed graphics known as “tampos” add new life to Hot Wheels cars, such as the Ford truck-inspired Baja Bruiser.



## ● 1975

Oops! Larry Wood includes his telephone number on Ramblin’ Wrecker and is bombarded with

calls at home from kids. The number is blocked out when the casting is reissued in 1977.

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● 1976

As America celebrates its birthday Hot Wheels adds to the Bicentennial festivities with American Hauler, a casting that carried the red, white and blue proudly.



● 1977

A 10-year run fades to black as nearly all Hot Wheels cars released this year appear with and without Redlines, effectively bringing to an end one of the most significant eras in toy history.





The Olds 442 remains one of the most popular Redline-era Hot Wheels castings, thanks in part to designer Larry Wood's adherence to the full-size muscle car. This casting dates to 1971, but replicates the 1970 Oldsmobile 4-4-2. (Mark Meredith collection)

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# Introduction

## Wheels of Fortune

The secret is out. Nearly every grandmother, uncle, cousin and daughter knows that the first Mattel Hot Wheels cars are the most collectible toys to be found in garage and estate sales, attics and anywhere else that hides treasure. For established collectors, the features that make an early Hot Wheels car are no secret either – they jump off the car with bright colors and chrome wheel centers. But it's neither of these brilliant features that identifies an early and sometimes priceless Hot Wheels car to the novice – it's the tell-tale red-striped tires that give away the secret.

Despite the wild Spectraflame paint and the California mods that have defined the first Hot Wheels cars introduced in 1968, it's the red-striped tires that have identified the first ten years of Hot Wheels car design as the Redline era. Even though the tiny stripe isn't as obvious as the glow of spectacular Spectraflame paint, there's good reason that the redline tires have become the hallmark of the early years.

When Hot Wheels cars were only a concept, Elliot Handler, who founded Mattel with his wife Ruth, knew his cars not only had to look better, they had to roll better. Even though toy cars had existed since before Henry Ford was cranking out black Model Ts, little had been done to improve the way toy cars moved. In fact, even in the 1960s, toy cars moved no quicker than Henry's T, despite the fact that Ford's flathead V-8 had been around for more than three decades, the Duesenberg straight-eight had come and gone and the overhead-valve V-8 was a way of everyday life for most Americans. Handler set out to correct that.

Among the innovations that his little toy cars would carry were smooth-running wheels that would keep up with the day's multi-carbureted hot rods and torque-breathing muscle cars. Early Mattel surveys of children playing with toy cars proved that, regardless of a car's appearance, the way a car rolled trumped shiny colors and exciting body styles. A team of Mattel engineers developed a unique bushing-and-axle arrangement that gave Handler the speed he was looking for in his new cars. From their beginning, pitting a Hot Wheels car against any of its competitors was like staging a 289 Cobra against a Model T on the quarter-mile – the competitors were anything but competitive.



With very few exceptions, every Hot Wheels built from 1968 through 1976 were built with Redlines. One of the first Hot Wheels castings was the Custom Camaro, a car that has a large following among collectors. (Mark Meredith collection)

For all of their magic, the axle and bearing components that made Hot Wheels cars a fast-moving hit in every sense of the word were like the man behind the curtain. At the forefront of the Hot Wheels image were the Redline tires, borrowed from the cool neighbors' hot Pontiac GTOs and Chevys.

Super Sports, and they are what defined the first Hot Wheels cars for kids, parents and grandparents then – and today.

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From the beginning, when Mattel's first designer, Harry Bradley, established the formula for the company's die-cast cars, red-striped tires have been a part of the Hot Wheels magic. This book takes readers through the world of pocket-size die-cast cars from the days before Hot Wheels cars hit the market, how the cars changed the market and through the first ten years in which nearly every Hot Wheels car carried the famous Redline tires that mark every early Mattel toy car as a treasure, whether it's hiding in a dusty attic, a forgotten toy box or prominently displayed on the shelf of a prestigious museum.



The red TNT-Bird hails from 1970, the first year for the Spoilers series. This line of Hot Wheels cars was filled with adrenaline and aggressive looks.

(Colin Bruce III collection)

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# The Birth of Redlines

It was a matter of perfect timing. The gas crisis hadn't yet hit, the Vietnam War hadn't grown into national debate and insurance companies hadn't laid down the law with high premiums for high-horsepower cars.

Fast cars were still king as the 1960s zoomed along. Fortunately, Elliot Handler recognized the passion and realized his giant toy company could produce toys based on this zeal that appealed to young boys and girls, as well as adults. While the idea seems obvious now, like any groundbreaking concept it faced an uphill battle at the time.

In 1966, Handler, the cofounder of Mattel Inc., approached his marketing department, as well as his wife, Ruth Handler, with the prospect of building a new line of pocket-size die-cast cars. It was a tough sell. The die-cast toy car market was saturated and dominated by the British Matchbox brand. Not to be deterred, Mr. Handler pushed forward with his idea, setting the stage for what would become – next to Mattel's own Barbie doll – one of the most successful toy lines in history: Hot Wheels cars.



Custom Fleetside has a direct lineage to the car that spawned the custom car look that made Hot Wheels popular in their first year. Designer Harry Bentley Bradley integrated the custom features of his 1964 Chevrolet El Camino into the full-size Chevrolet truck to create this 1968 casting, one of the first 16 Hot Wheels cars.



To compete with the extremely successful Matchbox and American Tootsietoy toy cars, Handler knew that his product had to be different, and better. He also knew that he couldn't do it alone, so he employed a member of the Chrysler design team, Fred Adickes. One of Adickes' first items of business was to create a design staff for the upcoming toy. Harry Bentley Bradley, a General Motors stylist working in the Cadillac studio, responding to an advertisement in the Detroit News for a design position, soon joined the Mattel team.



Several rare Hot Wheels from the Spectraflame era are shown with part of the Super-Charger and Speedometer sets many children dreamed would appear for their birthday to accompany their Hot Wheels cars.

(Mark Meredith collection)

Bradley would prove to be a perfect fit for Mattel, although it didn't initially appear to be so. At General Motors, Bradley was known for drawing hot rods with beautiful women posed next to them. He also drove a tricked out 1964 Chevrolet El Camino, customized by Detroit's famous Alexander Brothers.

Once inside Mattel, Bradley sketched away with Elliot watching over his shoulder. The designs were not like anything Elliot was used to, nor did they seem to convey the ideas he had in mind for his new die-cast car. Typically, sketches of toys under development within Mattel included children playing with accurate renderings of the toys, not the highly stylized works Bradley was drawing. Toy visionary and artist didn't click, at least not at first. Handler couldn't articulate his vision; he just knew things had to be different.

With the luxury of hindsight, creating a different toy car for the American market does not appear to be a difficult proposition. Other die-cast car companies, including Matchbox and Corgi, were based in Europe, and their toy cars were often unrecognizable to American children. Rovers, NSU models, and Leylands constituted the competition's die-cast toy lineups, and even when there was a toy car from a recognizable name like Ford, it was of a European Cortina, Zephyr or Anglia model.





The bulk of the first Hot Wheels cars were based on muscle cars, but modified with aggressive hood scoops, side-exiting exhaust pipes and a subtle rake that put the rear end in the air. Shown is a Custom Camaro from 1968 exhibiting these radical features.

American children who wanted to collect and play with cars like those in their parents' driveway had to turn to TootsieToy. While these children could find TootsieToy Chevrolets and Plymouths at their local Ben Franklin or Woolworth store, the castings were simple in construction with relatively crude one-piece bodies and two axles, each with a pair of wheels.

What these toys had in common was that they didn't roll well. To get movement out of the cars, children had to constantly apply force to get the metal or plastic wheels to turn around the relatively large-diameter axles. During the 1960s, when drag racing was in full bloom and muscle cars were the starting lines of every American drag way, children inspired to recreate their own Christmas tree competitions on mom's kitchen floor couldn't duplicate realistic race action. When trying, the toy cars rolled sideways, often flipped and just plain didn't go far. Aware of those, and working under the edict that Mattel toys must have a true play value, Mattel engineers set out to make the new cars roll better.



The Brabham-Repco F1 is a representative of the Grand Prix sub-series of Hot Wheels that debuted in 1969.

One of those engineers involved in the project was Jack Malek, who had already experimented with using mandolin string in toy instruments. Malek realized the potential the thin string would have in low-friction applications and suggested that it could be used to make the wheels of toy cars spin faster and smooth. Engineer Howard Newman took the principles of the low-friction wire further and developed a straight-axle suspension that allowed the cars to bounce like real cars, yet roll smoothly.

on the mandolin wire. The formula for slippery-spinning wheels included the wheels themselves. Each wheel was given a small contact point to the surface, and also received a set of bearings made of Delrin, a plastic material from DuPont that was strong and carried low-friction qualities. Most importantly, from an aesthetic view, were the red stripes on each mag-style wheel. This single feature became early Hot Wheels' most recognizable feature.

In each step along the way, Mattel tested its development of Hot Wheels with children. Groups of school kids were given prototype Mattel cars and competitor toy cars to play with, and at the end of each play session the children were questioned as to which cars they wanted to keep. Inevitably, it was a prototype car from Mattel. The company knew it was on the right path. Newman eventually came up with a fully independent torsion-bar suspension that allowed each wheel to bounce and give independently from the other wheels. The suspension was so different it was awarded a patent. Mattel had a winner.

In the meantime, Bradley struggled with design for the cars. Finally Handler pointed to Bradley's customized El Camino. That! That was what Handler was looking for.

The answer had been in Bradley's hands everyday as he commuted to Mattel's headquarters in southern California and he didn't even know it. Bradley went to work drawing the day's greatest muscle cars – Mustangs, Camaros and Firebirds – giving them a radical look that reflected the customizing tricks popular in southern California. Bradley's car also proved inspiration for naming the line. Upon seeing the El Camino, Handler said Bradley's vehicle was one set of "hot wheels." Before that, the working title for the line had been California Customs, which eventually became a recurring series. But it was Hot Wheels that earned the name of Mattel's wild little cars.

Making the first Hot Wheels cars into muscle cars also made a lot of sense. Their fast looks would match the performance of Newman's chassis, and it put every child in the driver's seat of the car like their older brothers or neighbor kids were driving.

Mattel's cars had a twist, however. These muscle cars sported a sweet rake, aggressive hood scoop and some even sported side-exiting exhaust systems – not what you'd find on the Camaros and Mustangs at the local dealership. But you would find such features on Bradley's El Camino and other tweaked machines driven by the hot rod crowd.



Hot Wheels cars made headlines when its Custom Corvette hit pegs before Chevrolet formally released the fiberglass sports car.



One of the most popular castings from 1969 is the Volkswagen Beach Bomb.



Play value was built into nearly all Hot Wheels cars, including the Heavyweights series, which included this Snorkel casting from 1971 with a moving “cherry picker.”

When Handler told Bradley he wanted his new die-cast cars to be like Bradley’s yellow El Camion, he meant it down to the vibrant color. Hot Wheels needed exciting hues to matching their exciting looks. Other die-casts from Matchbox and Tootsietoy featured reds and yellows, but the color and luster of Hot Wheels luminescent candy colors would make these enamel hues primitive in comparison.

The magic recipe behind Hot Wheels colors went beyond the paint – it went below, right down to the metal. Rather than spray a thick coat of enamel onto the metal, the method of applying the candy colors onto the bare zinc alloy bodies was allowed to sing. The shiny bare metal bodies formed the base for the transparent paint, leaving a vibrant finish worthy of its own name – Spectraflame.

To hide these wildly new toys in a cardboard box would have been criminal. Matchbox, its competitor, was famous for its little blue-and-yellow boxes that hid the car inside, only touting its contents through an artist’s rendering on the side. Mattel wisely marketed the new cars through a package that shouted the contents through a clear plastic bubble attached to a flat cardboard backing which also received a blood-rushing design worthy of the little car inside.

Rick Irons was responsible for designing the new package, and he gave it flair by avoiding

rectangular shape. Instead, he favored a wave to the top of the card. The card's die-cut shape also harmonized with the flame design, which was borrowed from the earlier hot rod and custom movement that swept through California in the 1950s. There was a method to Irons' madness: when the prototype name California Customs was ditched in favor of Hot Wheels, Irons' flamed card was a perfect match. Each flamed card was perfectly matched to stylized illustrations of non-descript cars by Otto Kuhni, a freelance artist who continues to design packaging for Hot Wheels collector cars.

Mattel's marketing innovation didn't end there. Handler further insisted that each package, or blister pack, not only be capable of hanging from a metal peg, but also stand on its own. Shelf space in retail stores has always been at a premium, and it was pure genius that Handler dictate that his cars utilize the same package for multiple methods of display. This guaranteed Hot Wheels could be displayed regardless of the type of space a Kmart or a Ben Franklin store had available.



The Customs series of Hot Wheels received less "custom" features for 1969. No longer were side-exiting exhausts, outlandish hood scoops and obvious rakes the order of the day. In fact, 1969 Customs, such as these Custom Chargers, closely followed production models.

(Mark Meredith collection)

Hot Wheels' engineered suspension and wheel bearings guaranteed Hot Wheels cars were different and better than the competition. Wild paint colors and brilliant packaging made Hot Wheels more exciting than anything else available and ensured the cars would sell. But it wasn't an easy pitch for Elliot Handler to make inside Mattel.

One man who didn't struggle with the line's potential was Ken Sanger, Kmart's boys' toy buyer. In 1966, fast-growing Kmart was Mattel's biggest customer. Convincing, and so convincing Sanger that the sales potential of Hot Wheels cars was extremely important. As such, Sanger was afforded a private viewing of the upcoming toy by Bernie Loomis, head of Mattel's boys' toys department, before the annual New York Toy Fair. An entire conference room was set aside with play sets and models, but it turns out Loomis' display was overkill. After Sanger saw a bright-colored Hot Wheels car go head-to-head against a Matchbox car down a stretch of track, Sanger ordered 50 million of the self-selling cars on the spot. Even so, Sanger felt his buyin might have been too conservative. He was right.

To meet the demand for Hot Wheels cars, Mattel converted a plant in Hong Kong for the task, as well as a plant in Hawthorne, California. The goal was to produce 1 million cars per week at each plant, but it would take Mattel months to attain this target. Maintaining Mattel's quantity standards, as well as the challenges in going from zero-to-die-cast cars, proved to be more of a time-consuming proposition than had been anticipated. Initially, manual labor was required to assemble the cars. Today, collectors can spot signs of this process in the chassis of some of the hand-riveted cars, which extra holes have been drilled in the bases.



Ira Gilford devised a futuristic platform from which several different Hot Wheels vehicles could be derived. The platform became the foundation of the Heavyweights series and utilized three different chassis lengths, the longest constituting a short-wheelbase car mated to a separate cab. Shown is the Heavyweights Ambulance, which used the shortest platform.



Before 1974, Mattel would infrequently decorate its Hot Wheels cars with stickers to enhance their appeal or to include necessary features, such as sponsor logos on race cars. In 1974, the appearance of a pad-printing process permanently adhere designs known as “tampos” to Hot Wheels cars, much like paint, bringing back some pizzazz lost when Spectraflame paint was replaced by enamel. Tampos appear on the top of this Volkswagen from 1974.



Before America’s bicentennial formally began, Hot Wheels kicked off the occasion with patriotic castings, such as 1975’s American Victory.

When Sanger first saw Hot Wheels, he predicted that Mattel would be able to sell every car it built and he was right. When the holiday season rolled around in late 1967, store shelves were dry and people were congregating around Mattel and its warehouses in attempts to score more Hot Wheels cars through Christmas Eve. Incredible demand for Hot Wheels cars continued through 1968 and in

1969.

Mattel reacted to that demand by increasing its offerings. From the initial run of 16 cars for 1969, Mattel created 40 cars in 1969; 1970 and 1971 each boasted 35 new castings. But by the time 1972 rolled around, Mattel had cut the number of new castings to seven.

Partially to blame for the decreasing number of new castings was the increase of competition. The excitement of Hot Wheels cars spurred Matchbox to create a new line of Superfast cars that attempted to keep up with Hot Wheels cars, both on the sales charts and on play sets. Hot Wheels' inventive nature also inspired new die-cast cars, most notably Topper Johnny Lightning cars.

Beginning in 1972, the company's most visible changes were obvious in the paint and packaging of Hot Wheels cars. Mattel eliminated the collectors' button that appeared with each Hot Wheels car and when cars hit the pegs in 1973 they did so without the glowing Spectraflame paint schemes. In their place were enamel colors that, ironically, Mattel had bested by creating Spectraflame Hot Wheels just six years earlier. Sales stopped slipping and moved upward, despite the less attractive paint. Ironically, 1973 castings are today some of the most valuable and coveted by Redline cars by collectors.

German technology added further interest, and sales, to Hot Wheels cars in 1974. Until then, some Hot Wheels cars, such as the Olds 442, Snake and Mongoose and Bye-Focal, were graphically enhanced through the addition of stickers. With the utilization of the pad-printing process, more extravagant designs could decorate Hot Wheels cars. Best of all, the process was flush with the car and didn't peel or scrape off as easily.



This Chief's Special and Police Cruiser reflect the "re-purposing" Mattel undertook on some of its castings. These mid-1970s castings were based on the Olds 442 from 1971, which featured a metal base, door lines, a removable plastic spoiler and an opening hood. To save costs, the hood was sealed, the base was formed in plastic, the door lines were eliminated and the spoiler was removed to form the cars pictured here.

(Pete Cambio collection)



Beginning in 1970, Mattel offered a Hot Wheels Club for collectors young and old to join. The first kits included Boss Hoss, a hoodless Mustang fastback in chrome. This casting joined the Spoilers series in 1971, but the chrome was replaced with Spectraflair colors.



Waste Wagon from the 1971 Heavyweights series included a bucket that functioned as a real waste disposal truck.

The pad-printing process was developed by German Wilfried Philipp, who initially used the process on watch faces under the company name Tampoprint. In 1972, Tampoprint displayed its process at the National Plastics Expo trade show in Chicago where Mattel employee George Soulakis spotted it. Since Tampoprint could put colorful designs on objects with curves, bends and crevices, Soulakis realized it would be perfect for Mattel's toys, including Hot Wheels cars and Barbie dolls. A full \$100,000 was plunked down by Mattel for the equipment necessary to purchase the Tampoprint machines. Utilizing the equipment on its products required Mattel to develop a grid system across the surfaces of Hot Wheels cars to smoothly apply the graphics, but the hard work was worth it. By 1977, every Hot Wheels car sported a new flash, thanks to these new "tampos."

The new designs brought forward by using tampos, however, could not save the line's defining feature. Realizing that Hot Wheels cars were intended to remind children of their older brothers' cars and that Redline wheels had fallen off the option list of U.S.-built vehicles several years earlier, Mattel eliminated the distinctive redlines from the wheels on all of its cars. The change occurred midway through 1977, leaving the year's castings available with two types of wheels: Redlines and

blackwalls.

More than 40 years after their introduction, Hot Wheels cars have gone through a multitude of changes and incredible success. Yet it is one single feature from decades past that still defines for many the greatness of this miniature marvel: the Redline.



As sales slowed, Mattel braced itself and dropped many of the series for 1972 and released only seven cars for the year, including the Open Fire, shown here in magenta.



Although named "Hot Rod" when Larry Wood sketched this 1932 Ford roadster-based machine in July 1975, the Hot Wheels car was released as Street Rodder in 1976.

(Illustration courtesy Larry Wood)



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