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MONTEREY GUIDE

Replica vs. Real

Can Today's Replicas Hold a Candle to the Genuine Articles?

By Tim Suddard
Photography by the author





Steve McQueen didn't wear replica Persol sunglasses. He had the real thing. His Porsches, Cobras and Ferraris were also all genuine.

Big difference between McQueen and the rest of us: He was a world-famous movie star with some fairly deep pockets. He also lived during the heyday of sports cars, when the latest and greatest were as close as the local dealership.

Today's enthusiasts have to face some different realities, thanks in large part to the law of supply and demand. Take the legendary Cobra as an example: Most of us would love to own one, but Shelby only built a few hundred copies. End result? Prices are through the roof. Logical solution to this situation? Replicas.

Replica cars have faced some tough opposition through the years, ranging from mild indifference to full-fledged disdain. What's the reality of the situation? Does going with a replica mean getting a less desirable car? Does owning one make you a second-class citizen? Will young children drop their Wii controllers when they point and laugh at you?

Reality Lessons

We hate to deliver the bad news, but there are some very desirable cars out there that you will never own. For example, Chevrolet only built five copies of the 1963 Grand Sport Corvette. While all five still exist, we just don't see one coming up for sale anytime soon. And if one does, well, the price is probably going to be on the steep side.

Other classics have become too valuable for many of us. Have you checked Cobra prices lately? Cobra roadsters—and forget about trying to buy a coupe, since only six of the seven built are known to exist—currently trade in the mid- to upper-six-figure range.

Quick—which of these cars is a real Cobra? It would take very sharp eyes to tell them apart at a glance, but the difference from behind the wheel is surprisingly obvious.



Shelby American 427 Cobra

| | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| layout: | front engine, rear-wheel drive |
| engine: | 428-cubic-inch Ford FE V8, OHV, two valves per cylinder |
| horsepower: | 335 @ 5200 rpm |
| torque: | 440 lb.-ft. @ 3400 rpm |
| transmission: | four-speed manual |
| suspension: | unequal length A-arm front and rear |
| wheels: | 15x7.5-in. front and rear |
| tires: | Goodyear Blue Dot, 8.15x15 |
| brakes: | 11.63-in. disc front; 10.75-in. disc rear |
| zero-to-60: | 4.3 sec. |
| 1/4 mile: | 12.2 sec. @ 118 mph |
| weight: | 2529 lbs. |

Superformance MKIII

| | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| layout: | front engine, rear-wheel drive |
| engine: | 427-cubic-inch Windsor V8, OHV, two valves per cylinder |
| horsepower: | 550 @ 6300 rpm |
| torque: | 540 lb.-ft. @ 4400 rpm |
| transmission: | five-speed manual |
| suspension: | unequal length A-arm front and rear |
| wheels: | 15x8-in. front; 15x10-in. rear |
| tires: | Yokohama AVID Radial, 255/60R15 front; 275/60R15 rear |
| brakes: | 12.8-in. disc front; 12-in. disc rear |
| zero-to-60: | 3.4 sec. |
| 1/4 mile: | 11.5 sec. @ 129 mph |
| weight: | 2548 lbs. |

Even if you can afford the cost of ownership, are you prepared to face the realities of the purchase? Will you get heart palpitations every time someone gets within arm's reach of the soft aluminum bodywork? Will questions about the car's authenticity drive you crazy? (Oddly, those who drive Alfas, Sunbeams or Triumphs rarely have to justify the provenance of their cars.)

Then there's an important question for those who see cars as investments: Do the prices still have much room for growth, or are they currently maxed out?

There's one other factor to consider when buying a rare classic: Do you want to be an owner or a caretaker? Every time you make a modification, personalization or upgrade to a rare collector car, you've probably hurt the value. In other words, forget about modifying a real Cobra to fit your tastes and desires. What you buy is what you get.

If you'd rather have a classic that doesn't face so many restrictions, maybe it's time to expand your horizons.

Nothing New

Replica cars are nothing new. Reproductions of pre- and postwar Mercedes-Benz models have been with us for decades. The first Cobra copies started showing up in the early '70s.

The industry has seen a lot of ups and downs since then, as replicas have ranged from laughable copies to competent duplicates. In fact, this sector of the market had a terrible reputation 20 years ago. There were many companies, both large and small, that took deposits and then skipped town or couldn't fulfill orders because they didn't pay their suppliers.

The flakes are mostly gone these days, replaced by very legitimate companies like Factory Five Racing, Superformance and Kirkham Motorsports. These are big outfits, too. Hi-Tech Automotive, for example, has grown into a major manufacturer that uses 240,000 square feet spread between 15 buildings. Their 600 employees produce about 400 cars per year, including those sold under the Superformance brand name.

While some of today's replicas do face build issues, more often than not it's the genuine articles that suffer from quality problems—and that's before they're exacerbated by 40 or 50 years of use and abuse. Most replicas actually correct ills associated with the originals. From fixing the suspension geometry to enlarging the cockpit so normal-sized people can fit, the replica industry has gone a long way to redesign and repair what was wrong with the originals.

"In general, the replica industry has improved dramatically with the growth in technological advances," explains Factory Five's founder Mark Weber. Since 1995, this company has produced about 6000 Cobra replica kits.

"Although 3D modeling is the current frontier for design and engineering for top tier manufacturing companies, Factory Five may be the only replica company to currently utilize this technology," he continues. "That being said, many companies are using CAD/CAM software now, a process that simply wasn't available when the original cars were constructed. In terms of safety, rigidity and robustness, replicas as a whole surpass their 'original' cousins simply because of the technological leapfrog that is afforded to current manufacturers."

Today's replicas can also take advantage of simple safety advances like collapsible steering columns, modern tire sizes and dual-circuit brake systems. These items simply weren't common 40-plus years ago.

Something to Be Said for New

While the restoration of a precious classic would, in theory, make the car seem new, unfortunately that is not entirely the case. Good or bad, these originals are still old designs that use old technology. And quite honestly, even if age weren't an issue, not everyone is up for repairing rust, stripping paint and freeing frozen bolts.

Most replicas, on the other hand, use new parts—and there's something to be said for modern powertrains. While a real twin-cam Lotus 7 might look good right now, having to rebuild the engine every few years won't be so appealing. The similar-looking FM Westfield, on the other hand, features a late-model Miata engine, fuel injection and all. Miata engines can easily outperform their earlier ancestors while lasting nearly forever. Likewise, the Lotus 7-like Bruntons use tough-as-nails GM V6 engines.

And have you checked out the latest small-block V8s from Ford and Chevy? They're a nearly perfect mix of performance and reliability. Stick the right transmission behind one, and they're quite efficient, too.

These new cars are not only reliable and easy to own, but many are quite fast. "Nostalgia is great," Factory Five's Mark Weber says, "but modern beats vintage every time."

He gives an easy-to-digest example: The fastest original 427 Cobra to circle the full course at Virginia International Raceway did it in a record 2 minutes, 14 seconds. Factory Five Challenge cars running stock 225-horsepower, 5.0-liter Mustang engines can cover the same ground with five seconds to spare. Higher-horsepower Factory Five cars can run close to 2-minute laps at the track. "The legend is not even close," he observes.

Collector Value?

Obviously a real Cobra, Porsche Spyder or Gullwing Mercedes-Benz is worth more than a replica. Call the genuine articles the automotive equivalent of a blue chip investment, as their values tend to trend generally upward.

But there have been dips in the market. Can you stomach them?

We have watched Cobra prices take \$100,000 swings before hitting their current record prices. If you buy that real Cobra today, what if you need to quickly sell it to free up some cash? And are you willing to see its value fall before coming back up to record levels?

Fortunately, they only built a few of these things and everyone wants one. Unfortunately, you just might not see the appreciation during your ownership tenure.

Quality replicas, while certainly not investment cars, often don't depreciate too badly. Hayes Harris, owner of Wire Wheel Classic Sports Cars, deals in used replicas—especially the Birkin S3 Lotus 7 replica—and says that while these cars still depreciate, there is a strong market for good, used replicas.

Nothing helps generate some real answers like a friendly face-to-face comparison

Face to Face

Sure, you can debate whether a replica can hold a candle to the genuine article until you're blue in the face, but nothing helps generate some real answers like a friendly face-to-face comparison. So we lined up both sides of the equation.

Jim Maxwell brought along the real deal, a genuine 427 Cobra. Like many of the 427 Cobras, this one is powered by a 428-cubic-inch engine, since it was easier to drive and saved the ever-frugal Carroll Shelby a few bucks.

Mike Stenhouse supplied the replica, bringing along his Superformance MKIII.

Mike is the club registrar for Second Strike, an owners' group for Superformance cars, and has owned his machine for 11 years. While we could have borrowed a brand-new car from Superformance dealer Olthoff Racing, we felt that Mike's car would be more representative of a typical example.

The Real McCoy

Few cars have inspired so many: The original Cobra has been the subject of stories, movies and even songs. The legend endures, and today just about every car enthusiast would list time behind the wheel of a genuine 427 Cobra as a life-altering experience.

In its day, the 427 Cobra was arguably the pinnacle of performance. It was a readily available street car that could accelerate from zero to 100 and back to a standstill in about 13½ seconds. That record stood for many years.

While a large number of cars can now match or beat that feat—a late-model Corvette Z06 can easily run with a Cobra for a fraction of



A good, high-quality replica like our blue Superformance MKIII (left) will usually get all the visible details right, like the kinky T-handle shifter and oddball mirror location. One of the advantages of owning a replica, however, is the luxury of trimming the interior and drivetrain to your tastes. After all, modern seating and the most up-to-date harnesses become a very good idea after installing a 550-horsepower engine. Smaller underhood details like the MKIII's aluminum radiator overflow tank offer more opportunities to improve over the original and add some visual flair.





the cost—the Cobra is still one of the most legendary cars ever built. It has just the right mix of raw American muscle and bad-boy attitude. (Truth be told, however, they were perhaps a little too raw for many drivers, and Ford dealers actually had a lot of trouble selling the cars; perhaps some credit should actually be given to the replica companies for keeping the flame alive.)

Up close and in person, the Cobra feels rather ordinary at first encounter. The driver is met by a large, wood-rimmed steering wheel and a bank of gauges fitted to a flat, vinyl-covered dashboard. The look and feel are certainly more purposeful than opulent.

That said, a Cobra is not really uncomfortable. The classic leather bucket seats are rather welcoming, if a bit too upright. (Many owners prop up the front of the seats to tilt them back, as they are not adjustable for rake.) Unlike a modern car, the body seems designed so the driver's left arm can reach the wheel while perfectly resting on the top of the door.

Turn the key, and the big-block Ford quickly roars to life. There is nothing fussy or fiddly here; the car starts right up and the exhaust gets all of the attention. While loud, it's not deafening—better than anything we've heard on the radio lately.

The clutch is surprisingly compliant. The



In the end, owning a high-quality replica is bound to provide loads of smiles and thumbs-up from passersby. What they lack in provenance they make up for in good, old-fashioned fun. On the other hand, nothing draws crowds and drops jaws on the concours field like the real thing. Is it worth the premium? That's between you and your accountant.



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brake pedal, while requiring a firm touch, rewards the driver with very confidence-inspiring performance. And despite the awkward shift lever, changing gears is buttery smooth. Once underway, the unassisted rack-and-pinion steering feels light, with little, if any, play.

To say that thrust is ample is an understatement, but the car does not feel overpowered. The 428 engine was rated at 335 horsepower, a figure that many modern SUVs can top. So while the Cobra will leave with alacrity, its power is not awe-inspiring. Perhaps we modern drivers have become too jaded, but car owner Jim Maxwell readily admits that the legend has been built up way out of proportion.

The abundant supply of torque does have a nice benefit, though, in that the engine feels almost calm and lazy when going down the road. There's rarely a need to downshift; just solve the problem with a little more throttle.

As far as handling goes, again, the legend outshines the actual car. While it's not nose-heavy or evil, there is some low-speed understeer, though at least it's predictable. Few would call the Cobra the best chassis ever built, but it does handle nicely. The weight bias for the big-block car is actually better than rumored, with about 48 percent of the mass up front.

The Cobra's biggest vices are the prodigious amount of heat that fills its cockpit and the generally nervous twitchiness it experiences when encountering undulations. Certainly both of these problems can be solved, but that brings up a sticky point: Should these cars be kept original or modified? As Jim Maxwell points out, he doesn't really feel like he owns this car; he calls himself more of a guardian.

All in all, while the Cobra feels old, it feels good—and actually much better than most of its rivals from the mid-'60s. It has plenty of motor, looks like a million bucks, and rides relatively comfortably with few creaks and rattles.

A Worthy Successor

A quick look through our Superformance's logbook shows that this car was built to run, not simply to be admired. It has covered about 42,000 miles in 11 years, with 3000 of those miles spent on track.

Owner Mike Stenhouse lives in Davidson, North Carolina, and has run at several East Coast tracks: Lowe's Motor Speedway, Virginia International Raceway, Carolina Motorsports Park and even Lime Rock Park up in Connecticut.

Interestingly, Mike doesn't own a trailer and drives the Superformance to these track events. Only once did the car need help getting home, and that was only because Mike zinged the engine. He doesn't even change the setup once he arrives at the track: it's a straight unpack-and-go operation.

If the Superformance is a copy of a real 427 Cobra, then it should feel the same, right? Well, yes and no. As genuine Cobra owner Jim Maxwell was quick to admit, well-built replicas like this one are actually faster, safer and more fun to drive than the originals.

While Jim's words ring true, there were certainly more similarities than differences between these two cars. The overall experiences were just so close—the view from the cockpit, the music coming from the pipes and the way the top of the doors made the perfect armrest.

Then some small differences cropped up—like just how well the Superformance is built compared to the original. While the real Cobra is a pretty tight old car, the 11-year-old Superformance felt brand-new. Not a squeak, rattle or flaw could be found. Credit for that has to go to the modern South African factory that produces these cars.

Unlike the originals, the Superformance cars come as rolling chassis, leaving the owners to choose their own powerplants. Mike

went with a potent small-block Ford that, appropriately enough, displaces 427 cubic inches.

The engine is based on a four-bolt main Ford Racing aluminum block; boring it to 4.125 inches and running a 4-inch stroke delivers the magic number. It also features a forged steel crank, forged steel rods, forged pistons and David Bamber-ported Edelbrock Victor Jr. heads. This engine puts out 550 horsepower on the dyno.

"The drivetrain was selected for maximum acceleration without excessive wheelspin, road course performance, exciting back road cruising and relaxed interstate cruising," the car owner explains. "First gear provides a brisk but controlled 2.4-second sprint to 52 mph. Second and third are good road course gears, with fourth for straightway speeds. Fourth is also right on the money for back road blasting. Fifth provides relaxed and reasonably economical interstate cruising."

The Superformance was noticeably quicker off the line than the real Cobra, and once underway it was no contest—a modern chassis and a big boost in horsepower gave the replica a huge advantage. Our Superformance was also running a more leisurely final drive—a 3.08:1 vs. the 3.73:1 found in the real Cobra. If the gear ratios were equal, the performance gap would have been even wider.

Both cars demonstrated similar handling and braking traits, although the Superformance had a heavier steering feel. On the other hand, its chassis felt better composed over imperfect pavement. And despite the nearly 100-degree temperatures of our test day, the Superformance's cockpit never got hot.

The replica's do-it-all manners are certainly hard to ignore. "Imagine a back road sprint to the Rockingham quarter-mile drag strip and ripping off the FTD on street tires with the only preparation being taking the top out of the trunk," Mike explains, "then a 1300-mile vacation with spouse to the Gulf Coast of Alabama; then a four-day weekend running the Tail of the Dragon with serious mountain road work there and back; then some hot laps around the VIR North Course at SAAC 31—all in a three-month period without even changing the tire pressure."

Who Wins?

Having driven literally hundreds of different classics ranging all the way from a Berkeley microcar to a Bentley limo, we'd have to say that the original Cobra holds its own quite well. We could think of few cars we would rather take on a tour like the Carolina Trophy or Colorado Grand.

The real Cobra is a blast to drive, relatively comfortable and dead simple. Unlike other exotics, its mechanical parts can be as close as your local NAPA store. Try that with a Ferrari Dino.

Nevertheless, the Superformance replica has a lot going for it. Compared to the original, it's faster in a straight line, handles better and costs much less to own. While we didn't perform any crash testing, we're tempted to assume that technology makes the newer car safer. Its pedigree—or lack thereof—is probably its biggest black mark. Vintage race and tour organizers are simply unlikely to welcome replicas like the Superformance.

Our two car owners came up with their own solution to this dilemma: The ultimate setup, they decided, would be an original Cobra to cherish and a replica to actually drive and enjoy.

Special thanks to Tom Cotter and his son, Brian, for their help in organizing this comparison. We're also grateful to car owners Jim Maxwell, Mike Stenhouse and Olthoff Racing for their cooperation and assistance.

