

LEGEND

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PHOTOS NATHAN JACOBS & BEN GALI



Brotherly love

Whether it's building award-winning hot rods or fearsome drag-strip weapons, Melbourne's McDonald brothers are united by an obsession with all things automotive



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01: One of the first T-buckets built by the business in the late 70s. A promotional car that ran a supercharged 425ci Buick V8, Turbo 400 and Jag rear end, it was at the cutting edge of street-rod technology at the time

02: Back in the 70s Ray built this T-bucket called 'Something Blue'. Powered by a blown Nailhead and running a set of McDonald Bros 15in mag rims, it was a stand-out car at the time and won a lot of awards. The car is still on the road with a new owner today

03: This '55 Chevy 210 coupe was Lindsay's street cruiser in the early 90s. It had small-block Chevy power, Center Line Indys and airbrush graphics

04: Built by Russell in the early 80s, this '68 Pontiac Firebird was the car that kickstarted the brothers' conversion business

05: The blown '65 Impala was purchased as a basket case and has been completely rebuilt over 30 years



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THE McDonald brothers – Ray, Russell and Lindsay (retired) – have been making a living out of fast cars for over 50 years, and in business as McDonald Brothers Racing since 1972. In that time, they have done it all – professional hot rod builds, speed parts distribution, drag car fabrication – and managed to put food on the table for six families to boot.

A perfect storm of two welders and a mechanic, the brothers are mostly self-taught and have spent a lifetime using their expertise to make things easier for the rest of us.

SM spent some time with Ray and Russell at their Thomastown factory to find out a bit more about their journey.

Where did it all start for the McDonald brothers?
As teenagers, back around 1964, we used to go to the drags at Riverside. Our older brother, Lindsay, had an FC Holden that we modified. It had all the usual stuff – twin carbs, a set of extractors and chrome six-inch rims. We raced it on the street like every other young kid did back then. There weren't really any shops doing modifications, so all our friends would ask us to help modify their cars. We started helping them, doing engine swaps and building hot rods and dragsters, working out of Mum's single-car garage.

And things just grew from there?

Well it got to the stage where we had more and more young kids hanging around looking for help to

modify their cars. The single garage started getting a bit small, so we extended it. We knocked down Dad's fernery when he wasn't home and that was the last straw! By the late 60s, we had cars on the front lawn and cars in the backyard and Dad gave us an ultimatum. We decided to take the plunge and opened the factory in Northcote in 1972.

You also did a lot of RHD conversions back in the 70s.

There was nobody in Victoria doing conversions. Russell was working on a Firebird he'd bought and we started getting phone calls from people asking if we could convert their car. We did Firebirds, Camaros and Mustangs for car yards in Melbourne and Sydney. They would pay for us to fly up to

down Dad's fernery when he wasn't home and that was the last straw!

Sydney and pick up the car – a brand new Trans Am with 62 miles on the clock! They'd say: "Here's the keys guys – take it home and convert it." We'd climb in that car and drive it home at stupid speeds! We'd do the conversion, drive it back and pick up another one. That went on for five years or so until the government upped the import duty on cars and the conversion market died.

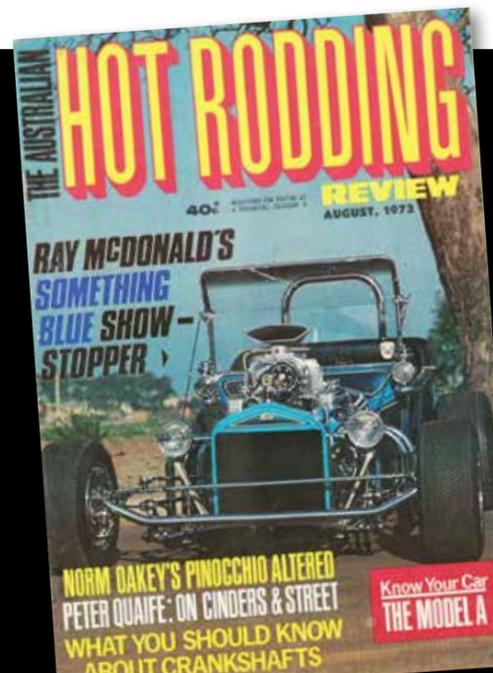
So that's the time when you started making T-bucket kits?

Ray had built a T-bucket called Something Blue and it was a top show-winning vehicle at the time. It took out Top Show Car in Sydney. We wanted to get back to our roots, so we thought: "Let's make a T-bucket kit." We made the whole car as a kit –

we made our own fiberglass bodies, the chassis, everything. They really took off. That's all we built in the mid-to-late 70s. We shipped kits all over Australia. And then the government introduced crash testing for hand-built cars. We spent a lot of money on engineers, but when they wanted to crash test an actual car we said: "No way."

When did you start selling speed parts?

We increased the size of the speed shop when we moved into Sydney Road, Coburg. We were quite big at the time, importing NOS kits, McCreary tyres and Predator carbs from the States. This was before anyone else had them. Lindsay and Ray went to the States and got introduced to Mike Thermos who owned NOS. He was looking



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06: This bantam altered dragster was one of many promo cars the McDonald brothers have built over the years as a rolling showcase for their talents. It was raced extensively in the early 2000s and achieved a best ET of 8.24sec

07: The original McDonald Brothers Racing workshop at Arthurton Road, Northcote, was the place to be in the 70s. Now their shop can be found in Settlement Road, Thomastown

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We did a V8 swap on a monster truck once and it was so big that we couldn't get it in the workshop. We had to hire a crane to take the motor out

for somebody to set it up in Australia. Same with McCreary tyres – they were the first soft-compound drag tyre available in Australia. All of a sudden we had 10-second street cars. They were 12-second cars before that because we couldn't get traction!

You were also influential in getting NOS kits legalised in Australia.

We had to get nitrous oxide approved locally. We had a lot of trouble from the police and even from ANDRA. We had to fight them to allow us to use it. They saw it as cheating – an unfair way of getting extra performance. We made petitions and had our kids walk up and down at the Nationals gathering

signatures to submit to ANDRA. It took about eight months before we could sell it in Australia.

What are you working on these days?

We're more into components these days. People want to do their own modifications but they're limited in their abilities. We sell kits that make it easier. We still enjoy the hot rod builds though. We get some good R&D out of that. You constantly come up with new ideas. Often the first time we do something it's just for learning. Like putting a nine-inch in the back of a Commodore with an independent rear end. We get a car, do the installation for next to nothing and then have someone test it. We make all the patterns so we can master it and make a kit.

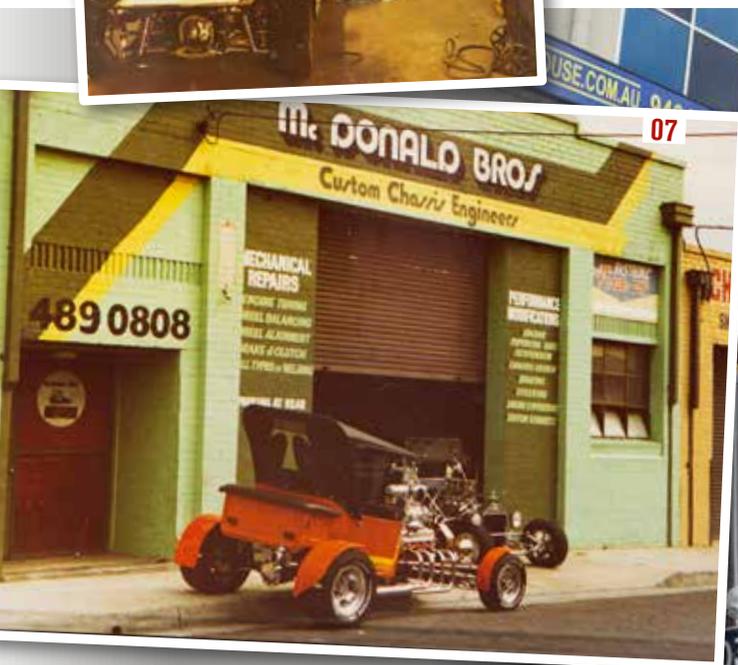
Seems like you guys love a challenge!

Every job we do is a challenge. It makes it worth coming to work. When we did the Trans Am conversions, we had to cut up the dashboards and reassemble them. It was a challenge to reproduce the engine-turned aluminium instrument panel. We came up with the idea of gluing a piece of

sandpaper to the bottom of a piece of dowel and using a pedestal drill to put all the circles on the dashboard. We couldn't think of any other way! We did a V8 swap on a monster truck once and it was so big that we couldn't get it in the workshop. We had to hire security guards to mind it in the car park for a week, and hire a crane to take the motor out! We take anything on. We've stretched a '57 Chevy; we even got a contract from Saudi Arabia to stretch six Land Rovers!

I get the feeling you love what you do.

It's our hobby. We've still got hot rods; a 1940 Ford and a '28 A-model. Chris [Russell's son] has a T-bucket. We've all got our toys and we still enjoy coming to work because we get to talk to guys about their hobby. In the old days we used to have school excursions come through the workshop. It was full of hot rods and T-buckets and 32s and the kids would walk through and ask questions. We get customers that say they came into our shop when they were little. Now they come in with their own kids! 🛠️



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