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**T**HE WELL-HEELED SAN FRANCISCANS WHO venture to dine at the Mission District's La Traviata on a cool breezy Saturday night wonder about the police activity as they leave the restaurant.

It is unusually quiet, and the flashing red lights reflect off several storefronts. Three police cars are stopped in a one-block stretch.

Except for the police cars, a tow truck waiting in the distance and two large, highly polished American sedans pulled aside by *las chotas* (cops), few cars are cruising and none are parked on Mission Street.

Quite a contrast from the scene earlier in the day. Picture San Francisco kissed by bursts of sunshine. It is a Mission District weekend at its finest. Preachers at the entrance to the 24th Street Bart station warn of evil and remind everyone, especially the political pamphleteers occupying the opposite corner, that only prayer will end the world's problems—political as well as personal.

Just a few yards away, persons of all ages line up at the Latin Freeze for the delicious, thirst-quenching natural fruit *paletas* (like Popsicles) in such flavors as coconut, watermelon, tamarindo and pineapple. From the sidewalk bins, shoppers carefully pick among the large varieties of fresh tropical fruits and vegetables, and they choose the meats and fish that will be served during the weekend family dinners. Young parents stroll with their infants and children, stopping for a pizza, a *taquito*, or simply to catch up with friends who are also enjoying the afternoon *paseo*.

Meanwhile, traffic moves slowly on both Mission and 24th Streets. Large numbers of pedestrians, some with baby carriages and grocery carts, impede the turning traffic. Music pulsating from the cars attracts the attention of the strollers. It's the kind of day that is best taken S-L-O-W-L-Y.

The cars move at a temperate pace in contrast to the rhythm of the music. Salsa, oldies and funky sounds create waves of excitement. A tingling sensation and the desire to dance overcomes—bodies sway from the waist; feet and hands move almost involuntarily. The slow-moving cars are lowriders, and their proud owners share the same name. They have labored hundreds of hours and spent thousands of dollars on these objects of folk art.

"It's a unique feeling," says lowrider Roberto Hernandez, "when you cruise down Mission and everybody is



**Lowriders complain of police harassment that has brought the activity almost to a halt in the Mission District.**

checking out your car, admiring the work you've done, the way you fixed it up."

Popularized in the late seventies by such movies as *Boulevard Nights* and *Zoot Suit*, lowriding is not a new fad. It is very much a part of the culture of *La Raza* (those commonly referred to as Hispanics by bureaucrats). It has had a strong presence in Mexican-American communities since the late thirties and forties. Because of depressed economic conditions in Chicano barrios, most *vatos* (guys) tinkered with old junkers and got them running again. Worn-out suspensions created the sunk-down-close-to-the-ground look that eventually became the new style. To lower them even further, cement blocks or sandbags were often placed in the trunk. A more radical approach required cutting or melting the suspension coils. These cars had to be driven slowly.

In addition to lowering the cars, it was important to make these *carruchas* as attractive as possible. Bent fenders were removed, dual pipes and rubber flaps added. Shiny new paint jobs and white walls complemented the sleek, classy look that was so desirable.

When cruising became high art for all Californians in the 1950s, Chicanos began cruising lowrider-style, giving birth to a new institution called the car club. Encouraged by community workers as an alternative to gang problems in Los Angeles, car clubs were respectable, family-oriented organizations. They arranged Sunday picnics at local parks, and all drove there slowly, caravan-style. These

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*'Low 'n' Slow: Lowriding as a Folk Art' airs on Channel 32, Friday the 29th at 9:00 p.m.*

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were excellent opportunities to socialize and display their artistic creations.

The focus on cultural pride in the sixties and seventies renewed the interest in lowriding and further refined the art. Cars became more elaborate, and technology permitted the lowering and raising of the car with battery-powered hydraulic pumps operated at the flick of a switch. Chicano art flourished in brightly painted murals in the barrios, and cars became moving metallic canvases. *Low Rider* magazine, first published in January 1977, reached enthusiasts worldwide.

Wherever *Raza* goes, lowriding follows. Soldiers in Germany write to *Low Rider* affirming their Chicano pride. The Fayetteville, North Carolina, Lowriding Club boasts that their twenty-two *carruchas* cruise the boulevard and "get stopped by the *placa* (cops), not to hassle us, but to check out the chain steering wheels or to admire our cars."

*Low Rider* reports activities from around the country: "To celebrate the expansion of their club, the Royal Few Car Club had a get-together in the beautiful mountains surrounding their hometown of Salida, Colorado." And, in Lubbock, Texas, "El Gran Fandango Jalapeño Car Show will soon take place."

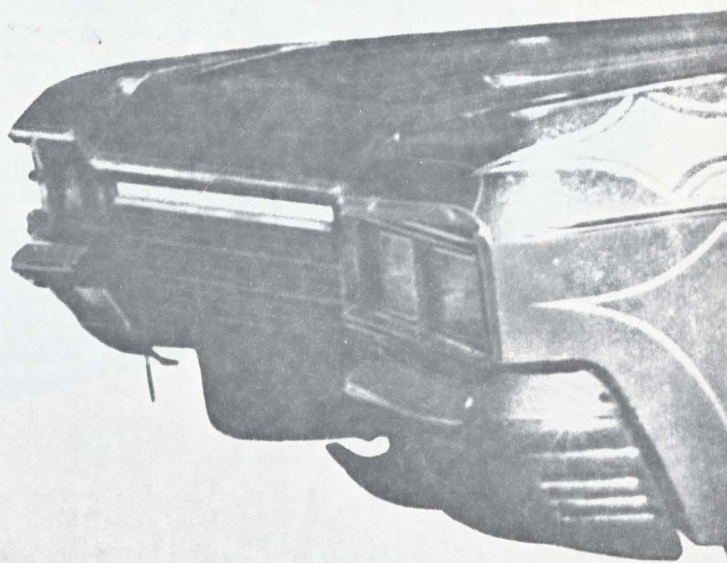
Every issue advertises hydraulics, tires and wheels, pearl-lacquer paint jobs, as well as fashionable lowrider "threads" and shoes. And each issue devotes a few pages to the hundreds of song dedications conveying the encoded messages of love that are at the soul of *Raza* culture.

**T**O MANY PEOPLE, LOWRIDERS, *CHOLOS* (synonym for *vatos* who dress in a distinctive style), *pachucos* and homeboys are one and the same—bad news. Lowriders complain of this unfair portrayal. "I was watching an episode of *T. J. Hooker* on TV a while back," said Fernando Velasco, twenty-two, president of the San Francisco Low Creations Club, "and some guys in *cholo* clothes were chasing a dude in their lowrider. Then, they used the car to run him down. No lowrider who has invested thousands of dollars into his machine would ever dream of doing something like this."

Rick Tejada-Flores, a San Francisco filmmaker who recently completed *Low 'n' Slow: The Art of Lowriding* for PBS, found that lowriders were grossly stereotyped. Many associate the term *lowrider* with gangs, zoot suit riots and antisocial behavior. "I don't sense lowriding is an act of defiance. It's a way of asserting personal worth. It's an aesthetic tradition expressed in what you do with your car."

Well, if they aren't the trouble-making *pachucos*, drug dealing thugs and gang members shown on TV and movie screens, who are these guys?

Roberto Hernandez, twenty-eight, born and raised in San Francisco's Mission District, got his first "ride" when he was eighteen years old. Hernandez has won numerous trophies at car shows. "Some people have their yachts," he





explains, "and we have our cars." When he isn't working on his car, Hernandez directs the Bernal Heights Community Center, which provides a Headstart program, GED classes, meals for seniors and recreational activities for young people.

Lowriding isn't enjoyed exclusively by the young. According to Hernandez, his parents like cruising, too. He recently parted with his '53 Chrysler and gave it to his father. "Even my mom trips out on it when they drive in the Mission on weekends," added Hernandez.

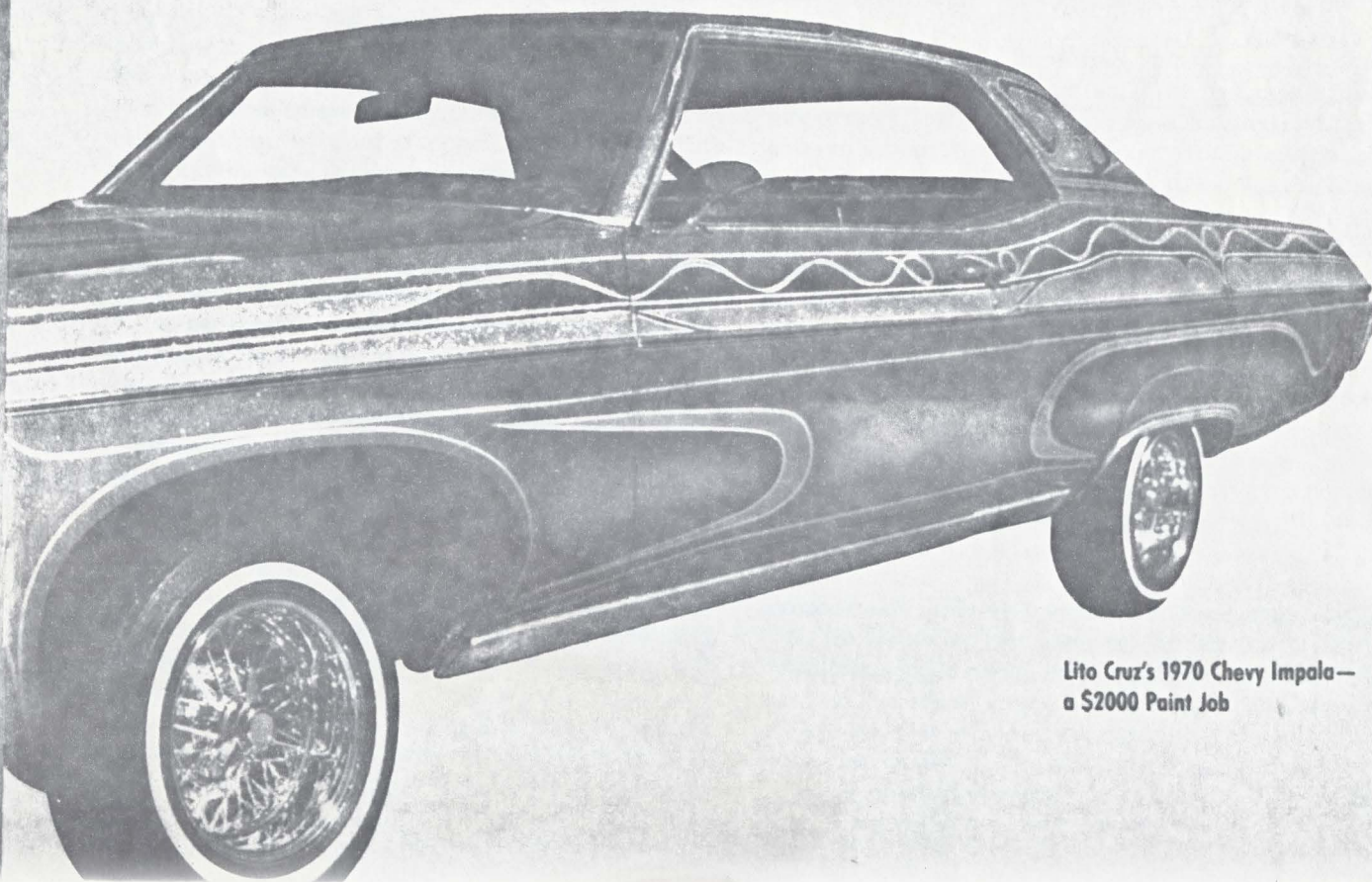
Lowriding aficionados are well-dispersed among the Latino community. Rene Yanez, director of La Galeria de la Raza, San Francisco's Latino Art Gallery, found that among the Galeria's most popular exhibits were two lowrider shows that depicted the cars, the people, the style and even photos of encounters with the police.

And, although lowriding tends to be dominated by *Raza*, the passion actually cuts across racial and ethnic

lines. For example, the Low Creations Car Club, one of several in the Bay Area, takes pride in its diversity. Twenty-six-year-old Tony Cahilig, whose older brother Perfecto helped found the club in 1974, explains that the club "has blacks, whites, Filipinos, Chicanos and people from many neighborhoods in this city." The Cahilig brothers were born and raised in the Richmond District, and the mantle of their parent's home is covered with their trophies. Their two young sons will probably continue in the family tradition of having the "baddest rides in the city."

Despite the positive aspects of lowriding, many lowriders feel that they have incurred unnecessary conflicts with the police over the years. In San Francisco, controversy and strained relations with local officials brought lowriding to an almost complete standstill in the city.

Roberto Hernandez participated in the cruise nights of 1979 and 1980 that led to numerous arrests, hundreds of traffic citations and finally to an ordinance prohibiting



Lito Cruz's 1970 Chevy Impala—  
a \$2000 Paint Job





parking and stopping on Mission Street on weekend evenings. "The Tactical Squad started sweeping people off the streets. It was like martial law right here in San Francisco," he says. During that time he received approximately thirty to forty traffic citations for charges even judges had never heard of. "Every time we went to court," recalls Hernandez, "all our buddies were there fighting tickets from previous weekends. Most citations were thrown out by the judges."

Inspector John Hennessey of the San Francisco Police Department notes that the lowriding itself was not the problem. According to Hennessey, the city was concerned that emergency vehicles couldn't get through on Mission Street because of bumper to bumper traffic from 18th Street to Army. "In order to appreciate all the work that's gone into the cars, they must be driven slow," says Hennessey. "Dealing with the traffic and the large numbers of people drawn to the lively atmosphere on warm summer nights was extremely taxing on police resources. Unlike Castro and Polk Streets, which are brought to a standstill by the gay community on Halloween, we had a problem two nights each week. The police got caught between merchants' complaints and community members who felt cruising was an innocent enough activity."

Similarly, in the Peninsula town of Los Gatos, lowriding was made a crime by the city council, although an appellate court later found the ordinance unconstitutional. It forbade driving a motor vehicle "on a highway for the sake of driving without immediate destination," or "at random, but on the lookout for possible developments," or "with the purpose of sightseeing repeatedly in the same area, and while driving with the purpose of socializing with motorists or pedestrians."

Not all cities, however, have tried to ban lowriding. In San Jose, lowrider clubs maintain harmonious relations with the local police. Biney Ruiz, San Jose's foremost

promoter of entertainment for Latinos, says lowriders and the police work on projects together. Ruiz, a ninth-grade drop-out and the mother of five girls, is a former welfare recipient who now organizes auto shows, dances, concerts, benefits and "breaking" contests for the Latino community. Her auto shows are also among the most popular events. "Most of the lowriders are older guys," comments Ruiz. "It's a \$10,000 hobby. They're average people who are into community activities; they've got good jobs, they vote. They're the farthest thing from gangs you could find." And there are lots of them in Northern California's lowrider hotspot, the intersection of Story and King roads in San Jose.

**I**N SPITE OF ATTEMPTS TO RESTRICT IT, cruising, no matter how defined, continues to be a popular pastime. In fact, diehards abound, and among them is one of Northern California's most colorful lowriders: Frank DeRosa, fifty-eight, of Pittsburg. DeRosa, who is of Sicilian ancestry, has had a longstanding love affair with cars. He likes them close to the ground, with custom paint jobs that attract lots of attention.

DeRosa cruised in the forties and fifties with other Latino, Anglo and Italian car buffs. "We had a good mixture of races," he says. "Whoever was interested in cars fit into our group. We used to hang out at drive-ins and the parks on weekends." But it wasn't all roses. "I got tired of the traffic tickets," DeRosa explains, "of being pulled off the road numerous times in one day and of having my car searched—so I gave up cruising for awhile." But, when his six-year-old son admired a lowrider at a custom show ten years ago, DeRosa decided that they should build a '51 Mercury together. Today both DeRosa and sixteen-year-old Frank, Jr. cruise and attend happenings in Northern California. "Lately I've been well-received on the streets and highways of California," says the senior DeRosa. "But a few years ago I decided to be like those guys from Berkeley and do my own thing. And, if necessary, I was prepared to drive around with a lawyer."

Summertime is just around the corner. The highly glossed candy apple red Impala that once sat in the garage of the proverbial old lady has gotten sixteen coats of paint, hydraulics, a plush velour interior, little *llantas* (tires) and the "baddest" sound system sold. The street light changes at 24th and Mission and the crawler comes to a complete stop. A mechanical mating ritual takes place at the corner—people smile approvingly.