

REFERENCE

MISSION BRANCH
SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY

V.F.-LOW
RIDERS

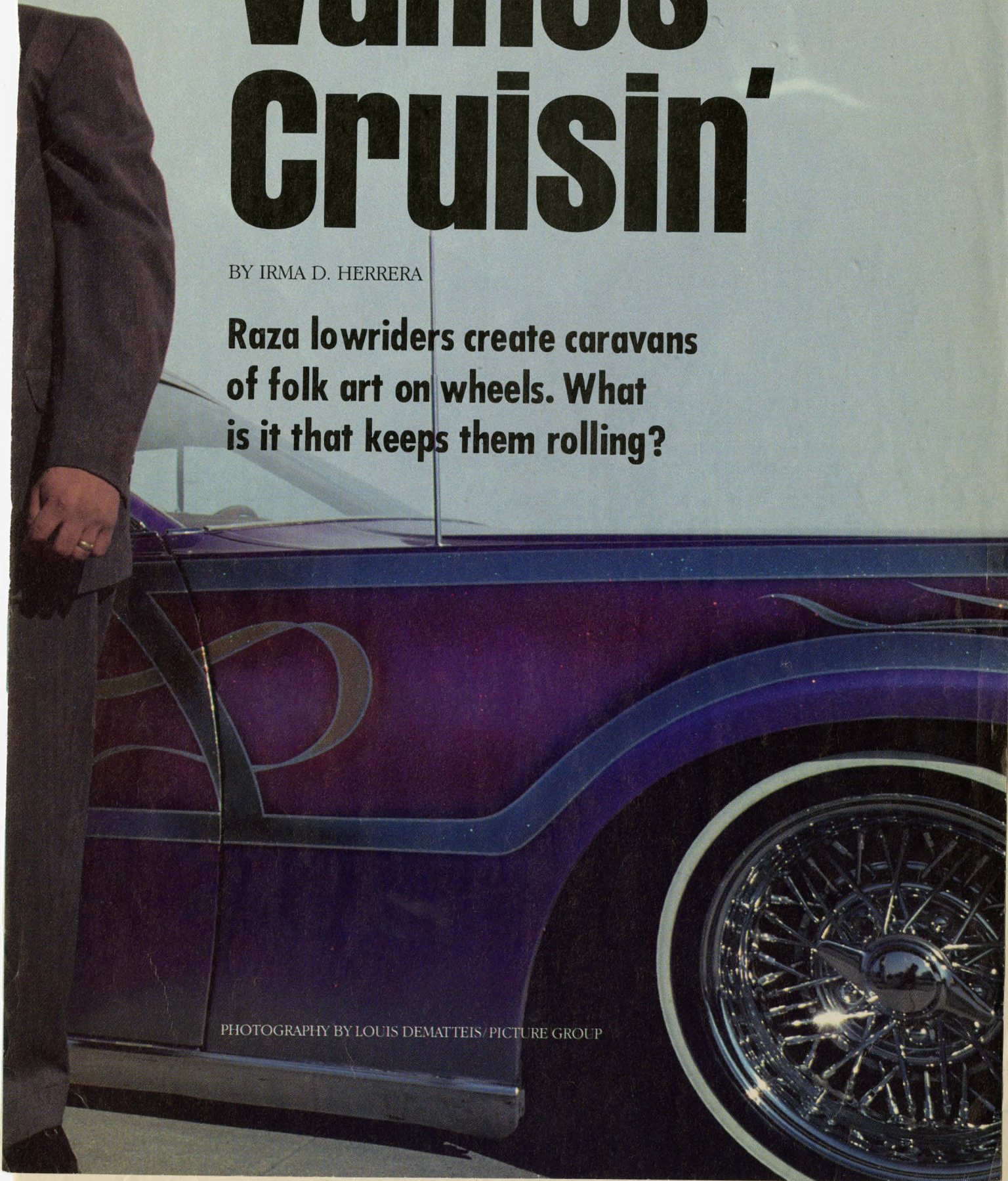
SAN FRANCISCO
Focus JUNE '84

Vamos Cruisin'

BY IRMA D. HERRERA

**Raza lowriders create caravans
of folk art on wheels. What
is it that keeps them rolling?**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOUIS DEMATTEIS/PICTURE GROUP



Richard Montoya and Rebecca
Cruz with Ovidio Hernandez's
1974 Buick Riviera



THE 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

Irma D. Herrera is a San Francisco-based freelance writer and contributing editor at Pacific News Service.

JUNE 1984

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



"It's a unique feeling, when you're cruising and everyone's checking out your car and admiring the way you've fixed it up."

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."

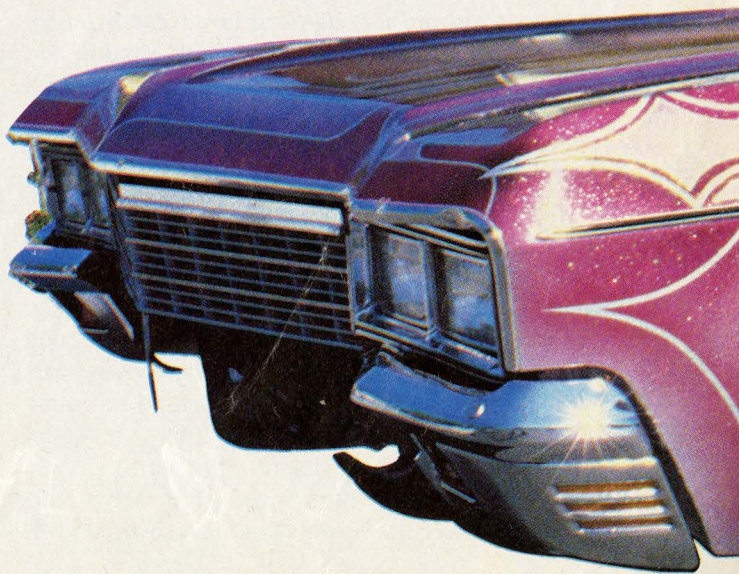
Every issue advertises hydraulics, tires and wheels, pearl-lacquer paint jobs, as well as fashionable lowrider "threads" and shoes. And each issue devotes a few pages to the hundreds of song dedications conveying the encoded messages of love that are at the soul of *Raza* culture.

TO 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."

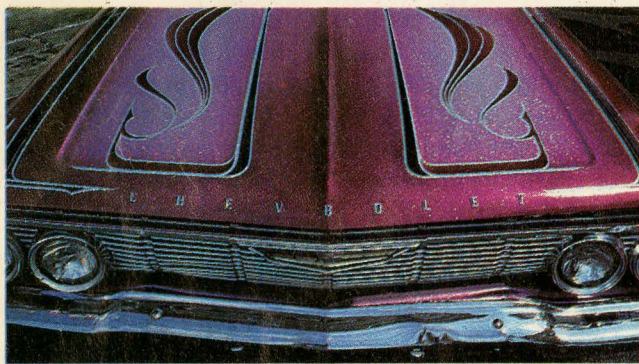
Well, if they aren't the trouble-making *pachucos*, drug dealing thugs and gang members shown on TV and movie screens, who are these guys?

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



Cholo and friend in front of his customized Lincoln Continental lowrider.





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.

IN 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.

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.

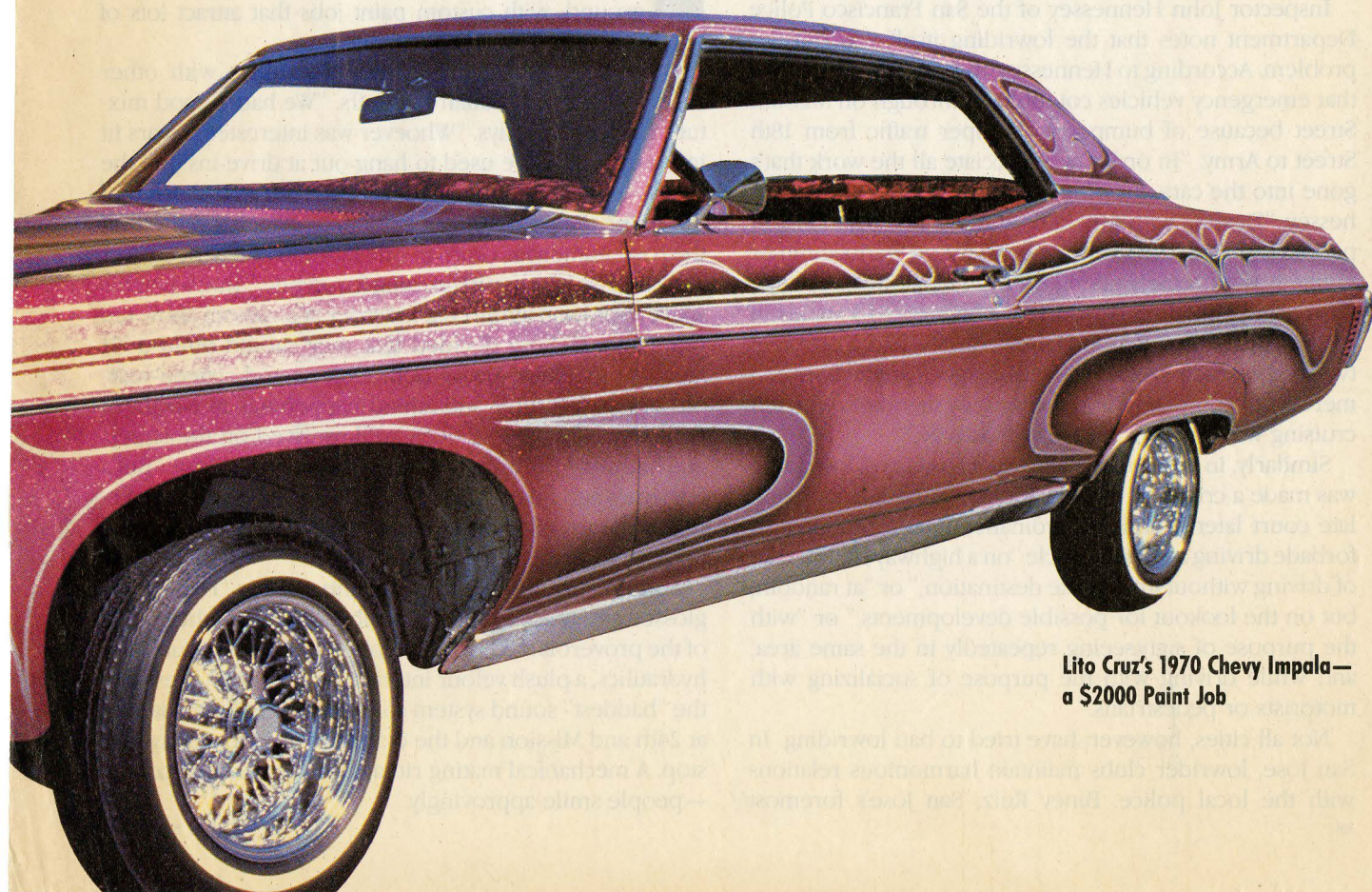
Lowriding aficionados are well-dispersed among the Latino community. Rene Yanez, director of La Galeria de la Raza, San Francisco's Latino Art Gallery, found that among the Galeria's most popular exhibits were two lowrider shows that depicted the cars, the people, the style and even photos of encounters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

paint. Thinking he could finally prove to his editors what a good writer he was, Maynard attempted to give the dull story a novel twist. He led with, "If John Smith had wanted a red convertible, he would have purchased a red convertible. . . ."

When the story was printed, Maynard, a man with a puckish sense of humor and quick wit, discovered his editor had chopped it to "John Smith complained to police that someone had smeared red paint on his car." Maynard stormed over to the editor's desk and demanded, "Why did you do that to my story? It was funny." The editor

height of Watergate, he graduated to a powerful and prestigious position: editorial writer. As such, he penned editorials for one of the most influential newspaper voices in the nation.

By now, Maynard had become one of the most prominent and visible black journalists in the country. But though he had personally made big inroads into the white-dominated press, he realized he was an anomaly. "During the sixties," he points out, "there were less than one hundred blacks practicing journalism on daily newspapers in the entire country." Unable to

country, had bought the paper and hired Maynard to improve its editorial content.

The new editor found he had his work cut out for him. Once a political mouthpiece for its owners, the rich and conservative Knowland family of Oakland, the *Trib* was in bad straits when Maynard arrived. In the past two years the venerable old daily had been sold twice and gone through three editors. Circulation had fallen to 167,000 and was sinking fast. Employee morale had plunged equally low, weighted down by random firings and demotions. The news staff had been cut from 150 to 130.



replied, "Would it be funny if you were John Smith?" The notion struck him to the core.

"For the first time," he explains, "I stopped and thought about the impact we have on the people we write about."

Maynard learned his lesson well, and over the next few years he graduated to bigger and better stories. Finally, he landed the assignment of a lifetime: covering the civil rights movement. He traveled to the South where he followed Martin Luther King, Jr. as he made his historic march.

"It had a dramatic impact on me," Maynard recalls. "They went through there like a tornado and wiped segregation out. They just blew it away. Seeing those walls come tumbling down changed my view of tackling large tasks. Here was this enormous undertaking, and these guys just sat down and asked themselves, 'What is it going to take?' Then they went out and did it. That's a hell of a thing. It changed my way of looking at the world. I realized that believing you can is half the battle."

MAYNARD WENT FROM COVERING civil rights to covering the nation's capital. In 1967 he landed a job as national correspondent for the *Washington Post*. Within six years he was promoted to associate editor, and, later, during the

forget what the civil rights movement had strived to achieve, Maynard resigned from the *Post* in a decision to dedicate the next two years of his life full-time to helping other minorities break into journalism.

With his wife, Nancy Hicks, who quit her job as Washington correspondent for the *New York Times*, Maynard moved to the Bay Area, where he founded the Institute of Journalism Education at UC Berkeley. The program trains minority journalists and helps place them on daily newspapers; it's become the biggest source of minorities entering the field in America. Largely through the efforts of the institute, non-whites now account for nearly 6 percent of professional journalists, up from less than 1 percent ten years ago.

Maynard likes to point to the program as further evidence that change, no matter how overwhelming the obstacles, is always possible, "if you're willing to roll up your sleeves and give it a shot. It's like my momma used to say," he asserts. "Nothing beats a try but failure."

Maynard has approached his latest challenge—rescuing the floundering *Tribune*—with the same simple logic. He signed on as editor of the paper in 1979 after making sure the Institute of Journalism Education was running smoothly. The Gannett Co., the largest newspaper conglomerate in the

Over the next couple of years, the *Oakland Tribune* made several false starts down the road to recovery. To begin with, Gannett tried launching a second Oakland paper, a morning edition called *Eastbay Today*, to capture the burgeoning morning market from the *San Francisco Chronicle*. It proved to be a disastrous decision. The new paper served only to drain precious staff energy and financial reserves from the afternoon *Trib*. Within a year, Gannett agreed. The company dropped *Eastbay Today*, sliced off *Oakland* from the *Tribune's* name and converted it to morning circulation. Soon after, in September 1982, Gannett pulled the plug on the paper altogether. It decided to sell the *Trib* so it could buy KRON, NBC-TV's San Francisco affiliate. Federal law prohibits the company from owning both newspaper and broadcasting operations in the same market.

The announcement sent shock waves throughout the paper for several months, until Maynard disclosed his intention to buy the *Trib* himself. Negotiations got off to an inauspicious beginning. The first time Maynard met with Gannett executives at the Fairmont Hotel to discuss a possible buyout, he found he didn't have enough cash in his wallet to pay for parking. (Thank

Continued on page 126

Nena Padilla and Richard
Montoya with Fred Brigham's
'48 Dodge



Working for the Best

BY ROBERT LEVERING AND MILTON MOSKOWITZ

Another day, another dollar? How about another stock option, paid sabbatical or corporate play palace? Here are the Bay Area's top ten companies, from an employee's eye view.

IT'S SOUL-SEARCHING TIME IN AMERICAN business. Gone is the era when an executive could tally a company's performance merely by tallying its account books. And, while profit is still, literally, the bottom line, companies are now searching for better ways to work with their employees and are beginning to understand that profits themselves may hinge partially on job satisfaction.

Does all this mean we can soon expect a sauna in every office building, picnics in the Rockies and

Robert Levering and Milton Moskowitz are coauthors, with Michael Katz, of 'Everybody's Business: An Almanac' (Harper & Row, 1980), a nine-hundred-plus-page guide to the 325 largest corporations in the United States. Moskowitz writes a syndicated business column that appears in the 'San Francisco Chronicle.'

