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WITH A SLAB OF YANKEE V8 BETWEEN THE STRUTS, 1972 MEETS 2011 IN ROCKY AUTO'S LATEST FRANKENZED

Words and pics: Dino Dalle Carbonare

When it comes to his cars, Watanabe-san is a hard man to please. Despite driving a Toyota Celsior as his daily driver, the owner of Rocky Auto has little or no interest in modern cars. For him, driving a car should be a sensual experience, from the moment you look at the car to the first time you turn the key and step on the loud pedal.

Design-wise, as he puts it, there is nothing out there these days that has anything over vintage cars, an opinion that becomes rather obvious once you take a walk through his impressive shop where close to 100 classics sit in various state of tune.

However, Watanabe is a realist, for how much he loves his older machinery, he isn't really prepared to put up with their mechanical shortcomings, be it in reliability, surpassed technology or outright lack of power and safety. By mating the new with the old, Watanabe has made a name for himself, and like every time we stop by to see what crazy project he is working on next, he pulls out something that blows us away.



THE ENGINE WAS SOURCED FROM A 1993 PONTIAC TRANS AM AND CHOSEN FOR ITS SMOOTHNESS, LOW-END TORQUE AND UNMISTAKABLE V8 SOUND

Sourced from the US, this Datsun 240Z is one of the cleanest cars Rocky Auto has created. You won't find any carbon-fibre or other lightweight body parts; the whole idea was to go for a close to factory look, highlighted just by a set of Panasport Racing 15in wheels against the very '70s-like factory mustard yellow. Vitaloni side mirrors and an extended chin spoiler are additions that spice up the looks, much like the pinstripe that runs the length of the car.

If it wasn't for the little V8 badge on the front fenders, nobody would ever guess that this American import was packing an all-new heart. Forget your L24 or stroked L28 straight sixes, Watanabe wanted to extend the American connection all the way to the engine bay, in which a Chevy LT1 now resides. The lazy 5.7L single overhead cam almost looks small in the vast S30 engine bay, fitted as far back as possible against the firewall to give a more balanced weight distribution.

The engine was sourced from a 1993 Pontiac Trans Am and chosen for its smoothness, low-end torque and, of course, for that unmistakable V8 sound. A custom stainless steel exhaust was fabricated to highlight the offbeat rumble and ends in a polished single tip, replacing the original twin pipe silencer.

With such ample space to play around with, there was enough room to place a large K&N cone filter right behind the grille where it can get as much cool air as it would ever need. The LT1 was stripped of all its plastic

covers and every exposed aluminium part polished to a mirror effect. Edelbrock head covers were then fitted for a more vintage feel along with a polished oil cap.

The large core race-spec radiator and electric fan could keep the big motor nice and cool even in the middle of a traffic jam in full-on Tokyo summer heat.

With more weight over the front wheels, there was no way Watanabe would be prepared to struggle with turning the steering wheel at low speeds, so on went an electric power-steering system, making parking manoeuvres a breeze.

Thanks to the basic exhaust and intake modifications, the single-cam LT1 now develops around 300hp, up 25 from its stock 275hp rating. It might not be much to write home about, but with the 240Z hitting the scales at around 1000kg in this fully trimmed version, you will be surprised at how fast this thing gets off the line.

Big-capacity V8s always serve up bucketfuls of torque, and with 45kg/m of twist on offer, you can literally drive the car around all day in third gear. Plant your foot in any gear and it will just take off with an accompanying concerto of pushrod mayhem and exhaust fury.

Sending drive to the rear wheels is a Corvette T56 six-speed transmission, offering a nice spread of ratios including a very tall sixth, perfect for cruising around in. Fuel economy is apparently very good, too. After all, the car is a lightweight!

VITALS

ENGINE: 5.7L LT1 eight-cylinder

POWER: 300hp

POWER FROM FACTORY: 275hp (LT1)

POWER TO WEIGHT: 0.18kW/kg

ENGINE HARDWARE: LT1 V8 engine conversion, custom engine mounts, Edelbrock head covers, custom intake pipe, K&N cone filter, electric power steering, one-off stainless steel exhaust system, racing radiator

DRIVETRAIN: Corvette T56 six-speed manual transmission

BRAKES/SUSPENSION: Rocky Auto suspension kit, R32 Skyline calipers and rotors





WHEELS/TYRES: 15x7in Panasport Racing wheels, 205/60 Bridgestone Potenza RE-01 tyres

BODYWORK: Vitaloni side mirrors, Mustard colour with pinstripe, HID headlight conversion

INTERIOR: Rocky vintage wood steering wheel and white-faced MPH gauge kit

With newfound performance and a little more weight over the front wheels, the suspension was one of the first things that were modified. Special Rocky Auto dampers went in along with lowering springs to help tighten up the feel of the car. Compliance was the main objective, as this was built primarily as a comfortable street car, so the dampers allow for a silky smooth ride.

R32 Skyline brakes and rotors offer great pedal feel and braking performance that the stock braking system could only dream of.

The interior has been left stock, only retouched here and there with fresh leather for the seats, door cards and shifter boot. A vintage Rocky Auto Z wood steering wheel and white-faced dials are the only items to have been upgraded, Watanabe preferring to keep things as simple as the exterior.

After dropping everything from RB25 and RB26s, SR20s and VQ35s into all sorts of Japanese classics, this S30 is quite the breath of fresh air. It's obviously not the first V8 transplanted Datsun 240Z, but done the Rocky Auto way, it somehow has a certain uniqueness about it. ●

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ROCKY AUTO HAS CREATED**



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