Riding Shotgun with Midnight Drive

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It sounded like a helicopter was hovering over the cul de sac of my quiet neighborhood on the night of November 11 when Steven Pacheco pulled up in his black, matte 350z. I peeked out the window and then ran out of the house to get my
first front-seat view of Itasha car culture. As I approached Pacheco’s car, I was surprised to see pink and white stars across the sides and a small anime girl on the hood. I crouched down and slid into the passenger seat and before I could say a word, Pacheco, flipped a switch to turn on red, LED floor lights and we peeled out of there.

Pacheco is the founder of Midnight Drive, a rising Itasha car club that is influenced by anime culture and aesthetics. He has shaggy hair and a black mask illustrated with an anime drawing over his mouth. “The girl on the car is Kanna Kamui from the anime Miss Kobayashi’s Dragon Maid,” says Pacheco. “That’s what Itasha car culture is, but I’ll show you more.”

I first met Pacheco at a car show he was hosting in an abandoned warehouse in Los Angeles back in October. At just 20-years-old, Pacheco attends Rio Hondo College full time in an automotive program while also getting his car-club business rolling. At nights after school, he’s busy hosting car meets, vending and promoting meets and related events through social media. He makes a living selling the hentai sweaters, shirts, and car stickers that he designs.

While this accounts for a majority of his income, he has recently began wrapping cars for clients — applying vinyl graphics and details over the original paint job (sort of a temporary tattoo for cars) — with various anime designs and others inspired by such television shows as Stranger Things.

On this night, our destination is Pasadena and, as he cruises around the city, he explains that there are different kinds of scenes within car culture, such as show cars, stance cars, drift cars and Itasha cars like his. Car enthusiasts can become initiated in teams that provide support, exposure and events to showcase your work. These showcases are often car meets, which are free, informal, typically held weekly or bi-weekly and usually attended by locals. Then there are car shows, which are usually, larger, more organized, held in parking lots and require a fee to get in and permits to hold.

Car teams most often have their own set of requirements to get in, which can include having a certain number of car modifications, whether to the power train or to the
exterior, such as how lowered your car is, what rims you have installed, your ability to do a touge, which is a mountain race. Some have no requirements.

Pacheco, who only recently began hosting his own car events, was initiated into a team designated for Nissans and Infinity cars when he first started out. He had only owned his Nissan at the time and had yet to begin designing wraps for it or modifying it. He remained with this car team for about a year, before a new president took over and began moving the team in a more competitive direction that Pacheco didn’t agree with. This inspired him to learn all the factors that go into organizing meets and shows and to start hosting them himself.

Before I met Pacheco the only car shows I had ever seen were the annual classic car shows my grandfather would take me to in Uptown Whittier on Saturday mornings or at Santa Anita racetrack. I wasn’t familiar with the new car culture represented by Pacheco.

Since October, though, Pacheco has taken me to small car meets held in grocery stores or small plaza parking lots in cities such as Arcadia, Pico Rivera, Montebello, Los Angeles, City of Industry, and West Covina. The meets are usually held between 8:00 — 11:00 P.M. on weekdays, and typically included around six parking aisles of cars. Everyone is invited to park their car and walk around, so long as they respect the area and don’t rev their engines too much or drive irresponsibly. Some people sport black Midnight Drive hoodies with the small logo in the front and an anime girl covering the back as they stood in groups and talked about their plans for their cars. The vibe is relaxed and people are friendly and talkative as music blasts from car speakers and photographers snap shots of every car design.
There is no show on the night Pacheco takes me for a spin, so we park and take a stroll around Old Town Pasadena. Pacheco talks about the monthly car meet he plans to hold at an In-N-Out on Colima Road in the City of Industry, about 15 minutes from Whittier College. He plans to hold it on the first Friday of every month.

The logistics are a tall order. To get the event together, Pacheco had to contact the manager of the In-N-Out and explain the details of the event and how it can benefit business as well. He spoke with local law enforcement, explaining that the event is intended to be a calm meet and parking permission had been granted. Then he worked with his team members to ensure that the event is well promoted on social media and through word of mouth. Pacheco also contacts local vendors and small businesses so they can seize the opportunity for exposure to sell art, stickers, pins, and clothing.

Pacheco’s events are popular with young adults and college students as they are held within a convenient time where classes and work shifts are over for the day. Being a car enthusiast is not necessary. It’s a place where people can simply gather with their
friends in groups and talk, walk around and admire the artwork on cars, or even check out small booths and listen to music.

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When I ask Pacheco about the stereotypes that are centered around car culture, such as trending videos of cars doing donuts in residential areas and cops maneuvering through crowds to catch them, he laughs and says this is a common misconception. He calls those videos as street takeovers and explains, “Our car culture has a big war against takeovers because we make it very clear to them that we don’t support it. We even have car pages dedicated to calling cops for these takeovers.” Pacheco claims that while his community may do power modifications to their cars, they use it respectfully and only on approved tracks. He explains that it is just a hobby for them.
The evening is cold and we finish hot chocolates and make our way back to his car. Back in the passenger seat, I find myself distracted by Pacheco’s car air freshener, which is illustrated with an anime girl wearing a black bra and a provocative look on her face. I ask if the Itasha car community is centered around hentai, a genre of sexualized anime. Pacheco tenses up a bit and then laughs, claiming that while it is a popular topic, you hardly ever see a hentai wrapped car. He says they mostly stick to appropriate anime characters and limit hentai to stickers or accessories.

Pacheco had mentioned that he’s striving toward working with Tesla. I ask him why, seeing as how different it is from the car community and business he’s currently immersed in. Taking off his mask, he replies, “What I have a passion for is the experience. I believe it’s important to let yourself be exposed to as many people as possible and be able to apply their knowledge to my own company.”
About two weeks after the excursion to Old Pasadena, Pacheco calls me at around 9:30 P.M. on a Sunday evening. He says that a team was trying to do a small meet within the Whittier area. This surprised him — he had previously explained that Whittier didn’t seem all that interested in new car culture as it was so deeply rooted in classic cars. This goes back to the days of cruising Whittier Boulevard when the Latino youth found its voice and a call to action rooted in Chicano style and lowriders. While this scene has at times been tarnished by stereotypes, seminal events such as the Zoot-Suit Riots and the rise of El Movimiento Chicano helped galvanize its place in local culture. Expressing yourself by cruising Whitter Boulevard with pinstriped lowrider was as much a political statement as an aesthetic one.

Another barrier for the new, cutting-edge car scene to take root in Whittier has been the lingering perception that the designs and teams are not family friendly enough for the city. But, as Pacheco said before, the hentai accessories were the only provocative aspects of these cars and often not as visible as the pinup girls on the classic cars shown annually in Uptown Whittier.

Growing up in Los Angeles, Pacheco was exposed to the classic car culture at an early age, but never felt that same connection with it as he does the Itasha culture. While this movement has evolved, new car cultures are emerging to serve as voices of self-expression for a new youth.

Jose Correa, a 20 year old college student who has attended a number of these local meets, is an example of the new enthusiast. Correa explains that while he may not own a car or drive himself, he finds the events interesting and a good way to make friends. He says he’s an introvert and starting conversations can be difficult, but the people he meets at the events are very open and friendly. He says he has learned a lot from the different people he’s encountered and the creativity that circles the events has influenced him to express his interests more.

While Whittier has had a deep history in promoting classic car culture and rockabilly style, it seems that with teams such as Midnight Drive and Corrupted Concepts now
hosting events with modern flavor, there is new life in a city long known for loving cars.