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A CONVERSATION WITH THE FIRST LADY OF AUTO RACING

ACT



WORDS **GARY WITZENBURG**

PHOTOGRAPHS **MONTALBETTI + CAMPBELL**



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"MY FAVORITE RACE IS THE NEXT ONE. NEXT WEEK, I'LL BE AT THE DRAG RACES AT POMONA. TWO WEEKS AFTER THAT, MY NEXT FAVORITE RACE IS DAYTONA. THEN MY NEXT FAVORITE IS THE LONG BEACH GRAND PRIX. AFTER THAT, HERE COMES INDY!"



MISS HURST GOLDEN SHIFTER and a bevy of cardboard likenesses surround the prototype Hurst Pontiac Grand Prix SSJ at top. Below are representatives from Linda's extensive collection of trophies and tributes received throughout her career.

LINDA FAYE VAUGHN,

America's first lady of auto racing, was born in Dalton, Georgia, just south of the Tennessee border. The youngest of three children, she was barely a year old when her father split and headed north to work in a Detroit auto plant. Her mother raised the children.

"We had a hard life in rural Georgia," Vaughn says. "My mom taught me how to appreciate things. She was a great seamstress and made the little dresses I wore. We'd go to church on Sundays, maybe square dancing on Saturday nights. My daddy and granddaddy were involved with the law, but they were bootleggers on the side. That was the way of life in the South. We knew Junior Johnson when I was little girl."

Vaughn grew up close to her grandma while her mom supported the family by working in a carpet mill—as nearly everyone did in Dalton, known as the Carpet Capital of the World. While in high school, she became interested in dental work and spent afternoons toiling in a lab for two local dentists. She soon became much more interested in cars.

She entered and won a local beauty contest, and in 1961 was crowned Miss Atlanta Raceway. The next win led to a 3-1/2-year run as Miss Pure (Oil) Firebird. Then she won a preliminary contest and beat 199 finalists to become Hurst Performance Inc.'s Miss Hurst Golden Shifter, a title she held until the early '80s.

Vaughn's beautiful face, bountiful blond hair, tantalizing figure, and warm Southern personality have been on display at virtually every major U.S. auto race, show, and speed parts convention for five decades—and counting. She toured military bases in Vietnam in the late 1960s with Richard Petty and "Big Daddy" Don Garlits, appeared in the 1976 "Gumball Rally" and 1983 "Stroker Ace" movies, was a public relations vice president for Cars & Concepts (which had bought Hurst) in the 1980s, and hosted ESPN's "Exciting World of Speed and Beauty" in the 1990s.

We recently caught up with Linda to talk about her life and career.

Motor Trend Classic

When did you first catch car fever?

Linda Vaughn: Jimmy Newberry, my very first boyfriend, had a beautiful turquoise and white '56 Chevrolet. After I had dated him a couple of times, the '57s came out, and I fell madly in love with his new '57 Chevy—and with him. He taught me how to drive, and we dated (on and off) for 15 years. It was his fault that I got involved with cars [laughing].

We had so many '55, '56 and '57 Chevys in town, and every Friday night the main street of Dalton would be full of cars. We would go to Bobby's Drive-In, then drag racing. I said to the other girls, "What if we form a club so we won't be left out?" The guys were the Road Ravens; we were the Ravenettes. I made fried



chicken and took it over to where they were working on their cars, so they could eat and we could hang out.

Growing up in the '60s was so fabulous. We didn't have drugs or killing. We had music and car shows and drag racing, and I learned how to hang out with the guys. Plus, they drank beer on Saturday nights, and I looked old enough to get the beer because I was busting out all over. So I made a deal: They got to drink, I got to drive. I was the designated driver [laughing].

And your love for racing?

We wanted to compete, so the first summer we rented a landing strip in Dalton and had drag races there so the cops wouldn't be after us. Jimmy started the club, his sister did the books, I sold tickets, my brother helped us, and we did well for a couple summers. It was so much fun, because guys from each town would hear about us and come over to try to beat us, but they had a hell of a time because we were that good. We whipped the hell out of Fords back then. Then they built a real dragstrip 17 miles south in Calhoun. Grady Pickle and Don Garlits built a top fuel dragster nearby, and I met Big Daddy at Pickle's house.

Was that about when you started winning beauty contests?

Jimmy's sister, Josephine, wanted me to enter a contest, so she bought me my first evening dress. I entered Miss Atlanta Raceway in 1961, and I won.

You started with drags, but you loved all kinds of racing.

Oh, yes. I even went Formula 1 racing with the Andrettis and became part of their team. And I dated Jim Clark for quite a while, until he got killed. He had a hard time when he came to Indy to race the great A.J. and Mario and Lloyd Ruby. He was shy and couldn't understand why A.J. was so rude to him and made fun of him. I stood up for Jimmy and told him, "Number one, you can outdrive A.J. here on his playground. Number two, you're with me. I'll bet that has something to do with it [laughing]." I was so proud of him when he won Indy.

Do you have a favorite race?

My favorite race is the next one. Next week, I'll be at the drag races at Pomona. Two weeks after that, my next favorite race is Daytona. Then my next favorite is the Long Beach Grand Prix. After that, here comes Indy! I spend the month of May at Indy with Nancy George, who owns the Speedway. She's my dearest friend. I stay with her, and we hang out together all during May.

You were married for 13 years but never had children.

I was on the cover of *Motor Trend* in 1972 and got married that December to Billy Tidwell, a drag racer, and *Motor Trend* covered my wedding. We parted ways in '86—I got eighty-sixed in '86. I've had only two real loves in my life, Jimmy Newberry and Billy, but I chose not to have children. Not that I didn't want kids, but I felt that Billy didn't deserve a child from me. Still, I've been blessed with a lot of children. My sister's and brother's kids are my kids. Mario's kids, A.J.'s kids, Richard's kids, the Allison's kids, the Unsers' kids—they're all my kids. They all call me "Aunt Linda." This is my family, and I love them!

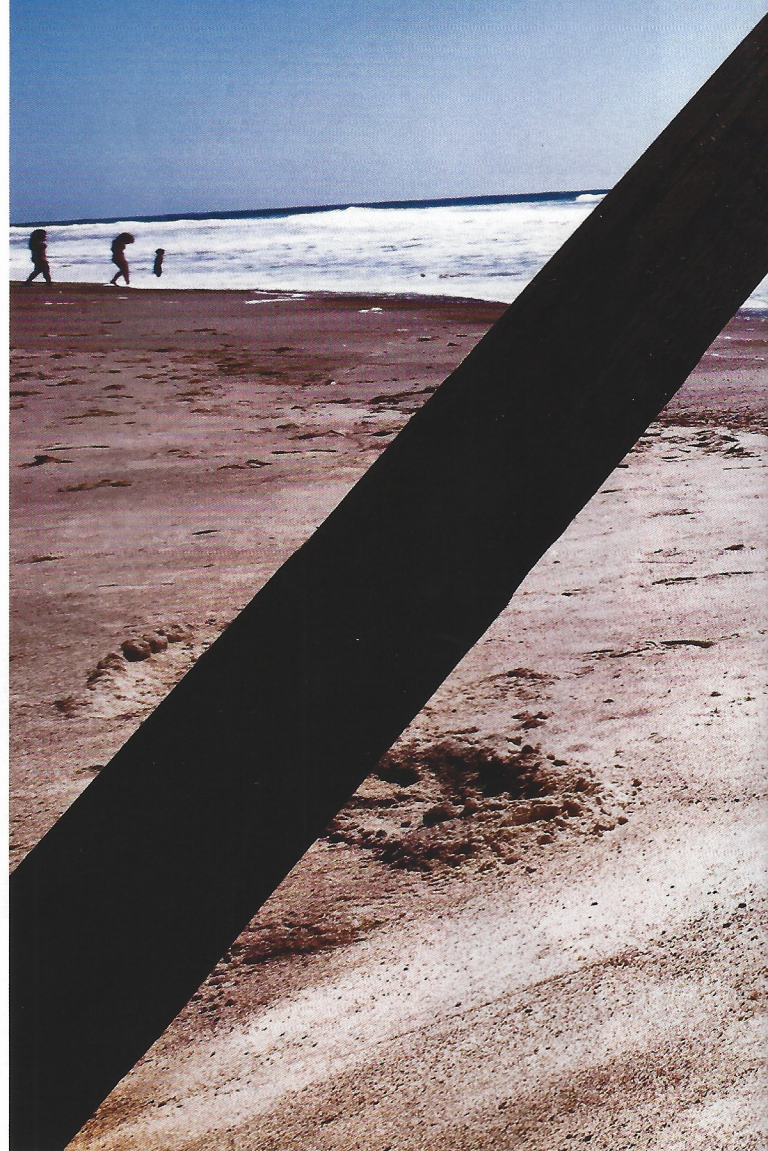
We're guessing you've been hit on once or twice in your life and career.

[Laughing] I've been hit on a few times, nothing wrong with that. I like looking sexy, and I appreciate being appreciated as a woman, but I would never overstep my boundaries. It's how you handle yourself, and I handle it with grace and finesse. I've very rarely had anyone who wasn't nice when I said no, because I have a way of saying no that was taught to me by my mother, because she and my sister were beautiful. It's a compliment to be hit on. I'm flattered, but if they're not a gentleman, not classy, I can definitely hit back [laughs]. Every once in a while, I still go out in my Hurst Olds and get hit on by a 30-year-old, and I'm thinking, *whoa*, this long hair must look good today—or is it my car?

Have you felt the need to demonstrate that you're more than a face and a body, that you also have a brain and a personality?

I'm always doing that. That's why George Hurst loved me so, because I really sold the shifters. I am a marketing fanatic, and very good at it, and I think that's what has kept me there. The looks will open the door and get you in, but what keeps you there is how smart you are, and what you bring to the pie, and I brought in a lot of racers and a lot of business. I sold millions of dollars' worth of Hurst shifters all over the world. And the musclecar is back—Hurst six-speed shifters are in Camaros and Mustangs, and they can't make enough.

"I WAS ON THE COVER OF *MOTOR TREND* IN 1972 AND GOT MARRIED THAT DECEMBER TO BILLY TIDWELL, A DRAG RACER. AND *MOTOR TREND* COVERED MY WEDDING. WE PARTED WAYS IN '86—I GOT EIGHTY-SIXED IN '86."





MORE ABOUT LINDA



MOTOR TREND ARCHIVE

The first time I met Linda Vaughn was at a Society of Automotive Engineers convention in Detroit. She was cheerfully signing posters for a long line of eager engineers, greeting each one as if they were a long-lost friend. "Wasn't that fabulous," she says now, "to be invited to the Society of Automotive Engineers, and me just a redneck from Georgia?"

The second time was at a media dinner. I was auto writer for *Playboy* at the time, and my editor (who was at the event) asked me to ask her to do a photo shoot for them. She had greeted me so warmly (as she did nearly everyone) that he must have thought we were friends. I did ask her, rather sheepishly, since I barely knew her, and she gracefully said no, with a big smile. "Several people at *Playboy* asked me to pose," she relates today. "But I promised my mother I would never do that, and I didn't. I turned them down. Then *Penthouse* came after me, and I turned that down. I made more money keeping my clothes on."

The third time I met her, she was a fellow competitor at a Jim Russell Racing School media race in open-wheel Formula Fords at the old Riverside course in Southern California. She didn't win, but did a terrific job staying out of the way of those with more experience. "I loved it! What fun we had," she says now with a laugh. "The instructors treated me like one of the guys and said it was great that the faster drivers could pass me without worrying about being wrecked. They trusted that I would not put a wheel into them, which was the greatest compliment I got."

The next year, the Jim Russell School did it again at the Laguna Seca track, south of San Francisco. Linda was back, with her mother and a famous friend, Mario Andretti. "That night," she says, "Mom told me, 'This is only the second time I've asked you not to do something. The first was posing for *Playboy*. This time, I'm asking you never to race again. Every lap, you looked like you were taking it out on your ex-husband. You scared the hell out of me and Mario.' Mario, who was cheering me on over in Turn Nine, had told me to go through Nine and go up close to the wall, but not touch it. I listened to him and was doing that. I loved Turn Nine, and the Corkscrew. But Mom said, 'That was the scariest thing I've ever seen in my life, so I'm asking you to never do it again.' So I never raced again." —G.W.



Have you worked with client companies behind the scenes?

Absolutely. [Hurst's] Jack Duffy was the best P.R. director who ever lived, and we worked closely with the Big Four. I didn't sit around and do paperwork, but I was in on the marketing, promotion, and advertising of quite a few projects, including with Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Ford, and Chrysler. I did a lot of work with Chrysler and with General Motors on project cars and pace car programs, and I worked with a couple agencies over the years. I even worked with James Garner on the 1972 Hurst Oldsmobile Indy Pace Car and with the late, great singer and racer Marty Robbins, who drove our 1974 pace car.

Did you pursue education beyond high school?

Yes, I did. I always wanted to be a graduate of the University of Georgia, so I went down there for a while but didn't have the money to stay. Then I came back and continued working with those dentists and got my state board, so I'm a registered dental hygienist in Georgia. I worked for them for three years, but when I got my jobs as Miss Firebird and Miss Hurst, I wanted to get involved in racing and get out and see the world. They said, "If you ever want to come back, your job is always here." But I never looked back. I did do a lot of night studies in marketing and things like that—nothing like self-education when you're on the road. So that was my college, the degree I needed, which is called "people." I'm a people person.

Your long-time major sponsor Hurst has changed hands several times.

It has been sold six times, and I'm not happy with what's going on right now. It's sad, because I know we could be doing so much better. Each one has kept me on, except the last one, and now I can't get my pension, so I've had to hire an attorney. That pension goes back to 1966 with George Hurst. It's really sad, a shame, and a disgrace that I have had to seek legal counsel to get what is rightfully mine.



MAGIC MOMENTS

We asked Linda to share some good behind-the-scenes Indy 500 stories. She offered these two:

Danny Folsom was the chicken king in town and a great friend of Peter Revson. He always invited us over for parties and dinner, out in the country, where we didn't have to worry about the public coming after us. We had a lot of great times with Tim Richmond, who was quite the Hollywood boy but fun to be with, and we loved him dearly. We took him over to Danny's one time, and he threw me in the pool. I had on a white dress, and you can see through white when it's wet. Do I have to tell you anything else? They had to get me a big towel to wrap around myself. I was furious at him for doing that. I was ready to whup his ass.

When James Garner drove our pace car, we tried to hide him so we could get him out for dinner and a good time. It was me, June Cochran (who was *Playboy's* Playmate of the Year), and three of my Hurstettes [assistants]. We took him to Brownsburg for fried catfish, he ended up in the kitchen cooking with the cooks, and we just rocked the place. That was hilarious! Then we got caught for speeding on the way back—here's Jim with five girls in our convertible—and we blamed it on June Cochran. We had fun.

Do you own any interesting cars?

Not like I used to. I've sold most of them, but I still have a couple Hurst Oldsmobiles, and a hot rod that I built. When I get through talking to you, I'm going to drive my '75 Hurst Olds down to the beach. Mostly I drive a Cadillac, and I really want a new CTS-V. Last May, Chip Ganassi gave me one, the two-door coupe, to drive for the month, and I did not want to give it back. That car flies, and it handles beautifully! Nancy had the pace car. I outran her a couple times, and then she wanted to drive the CTS-V. That car is sensational, everything rolled into one...badass!

What moments stand out as your most memorable?

Some of the most memorable moments of my life were behind the scenes, and my friends are my joys. Great people like Dario Franchitti, and Ashley [Judd, his wife]. He is so lovely, so wonderful, a Scotsman, and he knows that I was close to Jimmy Clark. Mario and his entire family have been extremely close. Little Al Unser was like a stepchild, and Arie [Luyendyk], who drove for us and won at Indy. There are so many, too many to mention. They all accepted me as their friend, and I was honored.

You are still busy working today.

I'm still Miss Hurst Golden Shifter. I've been making guest appearances at some great car shows with George Barris. I'm still active at SEMA, and I'm at NHRA functions when they want me—like at Big Daddy Garlits' 80th birthday next week, where we'll all be singing happy birthday to him.

And I'm going to continue. I hope to write some books in the near future, that's my goal. I told my mother that when I'm gone and people think about me or read about me, I want to be remembered like that '57 Chevrolet, a real classic. I love this industry and this sport, and love is forever. They have been my life. So I want to be remembered as a classic. ♦