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Bug owners swarm Volkswagen exhibit Car club members give mixed reviews to the new Beetle

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Alyce Jacquet owns a 1960 Volkswagen Beetle. Its name is Astrid.

Alyce named her car after the girlfriend of Stu Sutcliff, the fifth member of the singing Beatles, who left the band.

It was the only thing to do. Astrid is Alyce's fifth Beetle.

Yesterday was "Bugs on Broadway" day. To coincide with the introduction of the new Volkswagen Beetle at the Northeast International Auto Show, the Rhode Island Air-Cooled Volkswagen Association lined their rebuilt and not-so-rebuilt Beetles and VW buses from the 1950s, '60s and '70s along Broadway.

There, anyone who cared to wander up from the nearby Rhode Island Convention Center, where the auto show is being held, could see a 1971 Super Beetle restored by Tim Boyle of Cumberland.

They'd find Gracie Anne, the 1969 Beetle owned by Adam Waring of East Providence.

Or they could gaze upon Astrid herself, as always, parked pointing down the hill so Alyce will be able to start her. ("I knew how to roll-start before I learned to parallel park," says Jacquet.)

Maybe it was the shape, maybe it was the affordability. Whatever, the object of their affection is the number-one selling automobile of all time and making a bit of a comeback. After a 20-year hiatus, Volkswagen of America will soon be selling new Beetles in the United States.

Whether it satisfies the many owners of classic Beetles remains to be seen. Though the new model is a direct descendant of the car that sold 21 million copies since it was introduced in Germany in 1938, to some it may seem as different as man to ape.

The Beetle was created by Adolph Hitler and automobile designer Ferdinand Porsche as the "people's car," or volkswagen. Its presence grew slowly in the U.S. after World War II. But after the mid-1950s, it was a common sight on the nation's highways.

In the 1960s and 70s, the Beetle was often associated with the peace movement, as it was a popular car among college students and young adults.

But it was driven by older folks as well, who put up with annoyances such as inadequate defrosters, poor heat and rusting rocker boards to enjoy the benefits of high gas mileage, low cost and the joy of driving a small round car.

It was the inspiration for the movie *The Love Bug*, and a series of advertisements and commercials in the 1960s that became legendary. "Ugly is only skin-deep," read the caption of one print ad. Another joked about the small size by featuring 7-foot basketball player Wilt Chamberlain and the possibility of him fitting into the front seat of a Beetle. "They said it couldn't be done. It couldn't." read the copy.

"It was a breakthrough," says Ernie Schenck, a Jamestown resident who is creative director for the Boston advertising agency Hill, Holliday, Connors, Cosmopolos. "If you look at car ads up to then, it was always the fins and the chrome. This was such a radical departure from that, it took America off guard. The ads and the cars."

But foreign competition and stricter safety and emissions standards caused Volkswagen to phase out its cars with rear-mounted "air-cooled" engines, and the last Beetle sedan was sold in the United States in 1977.

Then three years ago, Volkswagen of America produced a "concept car" that looked like the Beetle. It was displayed at auto shows around the country and the public responded favorably. This year they go on sale. Rhode Island dealers will receive about 3,000 new Beetles next month.

The new Beetle includes some old features such as the rounded roof, attached rounded fenders, bud vases inside and the hint of rocker panels by the doors.

But the engine is in the front, the dashboard much deeper to accommodate air bags and the rounded windshield and the interior is loaded with all of the amenities that new vehicles in the 1990s carry. It also has a sticker price of \$15,200.

"It's a different car," agrees Bob Lahue, operations support specialist for Volkswagen of America, as he stands by a bright red Beetle at the auto show. "The public wants power windows, air conditioning and safety features. They want the old Beetle, but not all the old features."

As they inspect the new Beetle, the reviews are mixed among the members of the Rhode Island Air-Cooled Volkswagen Association. Since the organization was formed two years ago, its devotees have been meeting regularly at Bickford's in Warwick, swapping Beetle stories and comparing restoration tips. The new Bug has them buzzing.

"I like it," says Chris Conklin, 23, of Providence, the founder of the Air-Cooled Volkswagon Association, which has about 55 members. "I plan on buying it. But it's only the shape that's reminiscent of the old car."

Tim Boyle is also pleased, a stamp of approval that should make Volkswagen officials happy. Boyle claims to own about 200 Volkswagens, scattered around Rhode Island in different stages of repair. One is in his basement.

"I took it apart, twisted it sideways, and had my wife pull it in with me," says Boyle. "It's over in one of the corners."

J.P. Jacquet, Alyce's husband, is smiling as he sits in the driver's seat of the new Beetle.

"It has heat," he points out.

"Heat is nice," agrees Alyce.

But yet, she's not won over. A 29-year-old marine biologist, Alyce has been a Beetle driver since she was 17. Her parents used to pull their 18-foot sailboat with their Beetle, creating the impression that the boat was pushing the car on the highway. She can speak one sentence in German: "Mein VW ist kaput."

As far as Alyce is concerned, Astrid may be next to a curb back on Broadway with a temperamental starter and wipers that move so slowly she can't be driven in heavy rain, but she's still the real thing.

"It's cuter than I thought it would be," Alyce grants the new Beetle. But that's as far as she'll go.

"I can never get a speeding ticket," she says with a smile, pointing to one advantage Astrid has over the latest Beetle. "I can't get up to 60 miles per hour."