

*A Natural History  
of  
My Husband's Cars*

*by Nicole Burton & Jim Landry*

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*At rise: Triton 88, lit from above.*

*Music stands are positioned as follows:*

**(Downstage-Audience)**

**D**

**A**

**C**

**B**

**(Upstage -Keyboards)**

*The synth is repeating a rhythmical beat.*

*The first slide of Cars logo is projected.*

**(Jim enters, sits down at the keyboard and plays)**

Opening music: **INT – 034: Sigma Strings**

**(Nicki enters to D, speaking)**

**Nicki:** Even as a small boy in Virginia, Jim always wanted to drive.

**Jim:** I was fascinated by my father's cars, which he replaced every three years.

Dad was always the driver, but I knew one day that I would step into his shoes and disappear over the next hill, driving with the window down and the radio turned up loud.

Driving meant freedom and driving meant fun. I knew all of this at the age of 12. In some places in the US, a boy (or a girl) could legally drive at 14. Two years was a long way off if you were 12.

*(CUE: 1961 Mercury Station Wagon)*

**Nicki:** The first car he drove was his Mother's **1961 Mercury Station Wagon.**

**(Nicki moves to A)**

**1961:**

[The Beatles](#) perform for the first time at the [Cavern Club](#).

A gallon of gas costs 27 cents, about the same as a dozen eggs.

[Freedom Riders](#) are arrested in [Jackson, Mississippi](#) for "disturbing the peace" after disembarking from their bus, and

When [President Kennedy](#) triples the number of US military personnel in Vietnam, the [Vietnam War](#) begins in earnest.

**(Jim moves to D)**

**Jim:** The Mercury was Huge. We traveled to Texas to visit Grandpa and Grandma. We passed through the South in the Mercury. We saw field workers picking cotton. They were all black.

The air was so hot and thick you almost had to feed it into your

mouth and nose to breathe. It was a five-day drive to Texas. We stayed in roadside motels, as they were called, because you had to arrive at these places by car on your way to someplace else.

**Nicki:** At one motel in Mississippi, his younger brother Bill jumped into the swimming pool, which was right outside their room, and sank to the bottom and wasn't going to come up. His Dad saw his brother and jumped into the pool and pulled him up by his hair while Jim and his sister, who was only five, just watched.

**(Nicki moves to B)**

**Jim:** I loved the Mercury because it had push button controls. To go forward, you pushed a button. To go in reverse, you pushed another button. When you parked, another button was pushed so that the car would not roll away while you were shopping.

In 1962, we moved to a new house in a new neighborhood in Northern Virginia. This was the first house we lived in that no one else had lived in before us.

It was a “Split Foyer” house, meaning when you entered the front door you could go up to the Living Room/Kitchen/Bedroom world, or go down the stairs to the “Rumpus Room”, the laundry room, and the storage space where Fluffy, the pet rabbit, lived.

We had an intercom that was also a radio so that Mom could call us from the kitchen for dinner, which she made while listening to the soothing sounds of Pat Boone or Mantovani Strings.

This was the last house we lived in as a family. Later the family

would fall apart.

Dad had a new **Plymouth** and Mom still had the **Mercury Station Wagon**.

**(Jim move to A)**

I took piano lessons weekly on Saturday in a house in an adjacent neighborhood. Over time Mom got tired of driving me there. After all, I *was* 12. So, she let me drive myself the two miles to my lesson.

The car was easy to drive. You just had to push buttons to make it work and I must say I did a mighty fine job driving the monster. I sat on a telephone book so that I could see over the dash. I had to move the seat up (it was electric) so I could get to the pedals.

**Nicki:** He drove slow so as not to attract attention.

**Jim:** Anyway, I did fine until, a few years later. My mom had ended up in the hospital after she found the nice shirts Dad's new girlfriend had given him.

I decided I had to go somewhere—fast. I don't remember where. I got in the car, revved the engine, pushed the Reverse Button, jammed the gas, and flew backwards into the side of our neighbor's Ford Thunder Bird.

Oh, shit.

I moved the **Mercury** back into the drive and pretended that what

happened didn't happen. That's how my family was.

The next morning, the neighbor knocked on our door. I opened it. He asked to speak with my Dad. I left him on the front steps and told my dad someone wanted to talk to him.

They talked.

The car was fixed.

I wasn't grounded.

Life went on.

I went to college.

**(Jim to Keyboards)**

**Music: INT - -E 022 Random Blocks**

**Nicki:** He didn't have a car his first year of University.

**(Jim move to C)**

**Jim:** I was so anxious to leave home and go anywhere, I told my parents (Dad now living elsewhere) that I had to fly up to Bridgeport, Connecticut to settle into college life and select my classes and meet my professors, blah, blah, blah.

They bought it and I flew up in a prop plane with my “stuff” and some money from the relatives, proud that I'd made it this far, and

off I went in the first week of August 1967.

**Nicki:** What he didn't expect was that the University wouldn't be open that early. There would be no dorm and there would be no teachers to meet and there would be no cooked food to feed him.

**Jim:** So, I checked into a cheap motel that was very quiet during the day, and less so at night. And I stayed there for 3-1/2 weeks, calling home twice to let Mom know how well I was doing at University.

If I drove that year, it was in someone else's car.

(**Nicki** speak and move to D)

**Nicki:** The next year, however, his Mom suggested he get a cheap car to drive himself back to school in Connecticut.

*(CUE: 1960 White Volkswagon Beetle)*

She found and bought him a very used **1960 white Volkswagen Beetle**.

(**Jim** move to A)

**Nicki:**

**1960:**

[Elvis Presley](#) records "[Are You Lonesome Tonight](#)"

The [Food and Drug Administration](#) approves the world's first [oral contraceptive](#).

Harper Lee publishes *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which wins the Pulitzer Prize for best American novel.

General Motors releases the Corvair, and Ford, the Falcon, which it later sold as the Ford Mustang.

**Jim:** I was thrilled with my VW. I'd learned from a friend at school how to drive a stick shift, so I was ready to go.

I packed up my stuff, mostly clothes and some books, and drove from Virginia to Connecticut. No problem. I arrived alive. I had wheels.

Over the next year or so I drove that car to Vermont, New York, Boston, into the mountains, through the woods, everywhere, in all kinds of states of perception. Never had a problem, except for the car getting stolen. Twice.

I was working for the Black Panther Party in Bridgeport because I was anti-war (the Vietnam War) and I'd fallen in love with the woman who ran the Students For A Democratic Society (S.D.S.). Later, she took up with Jim Jones of The People's Temple in Guyana as his Press Officer.

But that's another story.

She was connected to the local Panther Party and I, under their direction, tutored kids in the “projects” of Bridgeport, Connecticut.

It didn't last long. Brother Huey in California issued a statement that amounted to my being fired. The announcement basically said that the Black Panther Party didn't need any white folk for the “struggle.

So I was out of a job.

**Nicki:** Then the VW was stolen. Two days later it was mysteriously returned, a little beat up, but drivable.

**Jim:** Three months after that, it was stolen again, and again it was brought back to me. The car had been taken to a “Chop Shop” to be cut up for parts, but somehow I was spared because of whatever connections I had with the Brothers in Connecticut.

**Nicki:** The second time he got it back, he discovered a small bag of heroin under the back seat.

**Jim:** I didn't use “serious” drugs, so I threw it away.

**Nicki:** He also bought the VW a lock.

**(Jim to Keyboards)**

**MUSIC: INT – E 032 Invisible Sun2**

**(Jim move to B)**

**Jim:** That summer, I drove home and Mom let me know that my brother Bill also needed a car to get to his school in Richmond, Virginia.

The white VW was a bit of a mess because of what it had gone through in Connecticut, and I was charged with cleaning it, fixing it up, and getting it ready for Bill's Freshman year.

I painted what needed painting. I bought a bumper to replace the missing one. I restored it to its previous splendor.

I taught my brother how to drive a “stick”.

**Nicki:** A week before Bill was to drive off with the VW, he took some school chums out for a joy ride and flipped the car into a ditch. One of his friends needed 4 stitches in his hand. The car was totaled. Bill had to make other plans regarding getting to school.

*(CUE: 1962 Green Volkswagon Beetle Clothtop)*

*(Nicki to C)*

Jim bought, with his Mom's financial help, a **1962 Green VW**, which he kept until 1976 when he was living in a group house in Washington.

**Nicki:**

**1962:**

[Andy Warhol](#) premieres his [Campbell's Soup Cans](#) in Los Angeles. The [Rolling Stones](#) debut in London, opening for [Long John Baldry](#). At the University of [Mississippi](#), its first black student, [James Meredith](#), registers for class, escorted by Federal Marshals, and [Marilyn Monroe](#) dies from an overdose of sleeping pills and chloral hydrate.

**Jim:** The Green VW had a cloth “Sun Roof” that you could open or

close using a handle on the roof of the car. It had at some point been spray-painted green, I don't know by who.

I loved my cloth Sun Roof and I loved my green VW. It threw a piston on the Capitol Beltway in the mid-'70s. I was somehow able to steer it into a gas station where I called my Dad for advice.

His advice: Buy another car. So that's what I did.

*(CUE: White 1976 Datsun B210)*

**Nicki:** The new car was his first **New Car**, a white **1976 Datsun B210**, “The Death Car.” A complete disaster.

**1976:**

The [Washington Metro](#) opens five stations on the Red Line, Farragut North to Rhode Island Avenue.

The punk group, the [Ramones](#), release their first album.

The US celebrates the [US Bicentennial](#), with the 200th anniversary of the [Declaration of Independence](#), and

Former Chilean Ambassador [Orlando Letelier](#) is assassinated when agents of [Augusto Pinochet](#) blow up his car on Embassy Row. (I heard the explosion.)

**Jim:** I was so excited about my Datsun. It smelled like a new car. I never had a car that smelled like that. It was small and economical. I installed a radio in it because it didn't come with one. It was a little peppy, but most important, it had not been owned by anyone before I

got it. It was NEW.

**Nicki:** It didn't take long for things to go wrong.

**Jim:** There was, suddenly, a kind of “clicking” sound coming from the front of the car. A kind of Tap, Tap, Tap, Tap, Tap. I couldn't figure out what it was, so I took it to “the shop”.

The guy at the shop said he would look it over and give me an estimate, which is what he did. He “tuned” it all up and gave it back to me, and I still heard a Tap, Tap, Tap coming from the front of the car.

**Nicki:** So he took it back.

**Jim:** Boy, was I pissed off. I had taken it in, paid my money, and he didn't get rid of the Tap Tap Tap. The guy promised me all would be repaired.

A day went by.

Then another day.

I heard nothing from the Guy.

I called him.

He didn't answer.

Now I was really pissed off, so I borrowed a friend's car and drove back to the shop to have it out with the guy, but the place was closed and empty. No one was there.

So I called and I called and I went back and one day one of the mechanics was there and I asked him where the guy was because I had an issue with him and the mechanic said, “Oh, don't you know?”

The guy is *dead*.”

**Nicki:** “Say, *what?*”

**Jim:** “Yeah” says the mechanic. “He was working on a car and just keeled over and died. I'm sorry you didn't know.”

**Nicki:** So the guy who was fixing the car died.

**Jim:** And the car still had a Tap Tap Tap noise. About a week later, I was performing car stuff on the Datsun and I pulled the dip stick out to check the oil, which was at a good level, and after putting the dip stick back, when I started the car, the Tap Tap Tap wasn't there. Gone. Quiet.

Just the way a new car should sound when the dip stick is put in correctly.

A man had died because I put the dip stick in wrong.

I hated this car now and had to get rid of it, which is what I did. I sold it, at a loss, to a young girl whose father was buying it for her as a graduation present. She loved the fact that it had a radio.

(**Jim** to Keyboards)

**MUSIC: INT E 037 Miami Virtue**

*CUE: Green 1970 AMC Ambassador*

(**Nicki** move to A)

**Nicki:** Since he'd dumped the Datsun, Jim needed a car and what he bought was a **1970 AMC Ambassador Four Door**.

**1970:**

The first [Earth Day](#) is proclaimed by [San Francisco Mayor Alioto](#).

Four students at [Kent State University](#) are shot and killed by Ohio State National Guards at a protest against the US incursion into [Cambodia](#). In Washington, 100,000 people demonstrate against the Vietnam War.

The [Chevrolet Vega](#) is introduced, and a day later, the [Ford Pinto](#). [American Motors](#) follows with the [Gremlin](#).

**JIM:** I took the Ambassador to Vermont with my friend Steve. We camped out in it. I think that maybe the front seats could be brought all the way back, but I'm not sure.

It was a “full size” car. It was an automatic. It was Puke Green.

It was the era of gas shortages and long lines at the filling station.

It leaked like a sieve.

This was the car that introduced me to my future wife. She drove a junker too.

Eventually, this became a car with no heat in the Winter. I don't know why I didn't have it fixed but maybe I didn't trust myself after

the previous mechanic had up and died on me. I think that I tended to think of this car as a bridge between where I was (dead mechanic) and redemption.

There were many scenes of me with the hood up, tending to some emergency shortage of fluids. Things were always dripping out of this car but it was OK as long as you refilled them. I could tell when the water was low because the little arrow on the dash would work its way up to HOT. Then I had to stop and put water, which I carried with me at all times, into the radiator.

(**Jim** to Keyboards)

**Music:** INT – **E 046** **Ethereal Piano**

(**Jim** move to D)

**Jim:** I finally gave this car to my sister, who, at the time, had no car. She also had no money, so it seemed like a good fit. She drove the car for a few months and when the radiator overheated near National Airport, she parked it at the airport and walked away.

*(CUE: Gold 1972 Oldsmobile Delta 88)*

**Nicki:** His next victim was a **1972 Oldsmobile Delta 88.**

**1972:**

[Shirley Chisholm](#), the first African American Congresswoman, announces her candidacy for President.

Comedian [George Carlin](#) is arrested for reciting his "Seven Words

You Can Never Say On Television.”

The last U.S. ground troops withdraw from Vietnam, and Volkswagen introduces the [Thing](#).

**Jim:** The Oldsmobile was a MONSTER. Gold, as is appropriate for a PimpMobile. It was like commuting in a Pleasure Liner or a Space Ship. It was so big I couldn't see around it.

The most astonishing thing about this car was that I bought it from a family of gypsies in Falls Church.

I think what I really wanted to buy were the electric windows that went up or down with the flick of a button on the dash. The seats were electric too and you could guide them up or down or move them to the front, or stretch you legs and move the seats wayyy back. The doors had an authoritative “thunk” as the massive thing shut.

**Nicki:** And it was Gold. Solid Gold!

**Jim:** How I bought this car was that I needed a car, I saw a sign on a house stating that they had a car to sell, so I went in and I bought it. No bells went off in my head. It didn't seem odd or stupid to do this. It just happened.

This was the most “not me” car I could've owned. This was a car for a rich, overweight Shaper of Industry, or maybe that person's wife.

**Nicki:** The gas bill was huge. Everything was huge.

**Jim:** I kept hitting things, like other cars in parking lots. Just little

“fender-benders” and stuff like that. But my insurance company was keeping track, something that hadn't occurred to me.

**Nicki:** Then came The Crash.

**Jim:** The crash happened on 16<sup>th</sup> Street in the District. It was Spring and the leaves were all out. Nicki was in the car with me. We came to an intersection where there was a red light that I didn't see because the trees covered it up, and I broadsided a car crossing the intersection. I hit the car so hard, it turned around 180 degrees.

(**Jim** move to Keyboards)

**Music cue:** **INT E 047 Wine and Cheese**

(**Jim** move to C)

**Nicki:** Thank God, no one was hurt, but the car he hit was a mess.

**Jim:** The Olds was more or less OK. But in totaling up all of the claims I put on the insurance with this car, this one crash broke the bank and I was relegated to finding new insurance until I became a good bet again. Most of my earnings at the publishing house I worked for went to Poor Mouse Insurance each month.

It was a long haul. I finally put an ad in the paper and a dude came and bought the Oldsmobile and drove it away in a cloud of smoke.

(*CUE: 1976 Blue Ford Fiesta 2-Door Hatchback*)

**Nicki:** Once again, Jim needed a car. So, he bought another car

from a used car lot, a baby blue **1976 Ford Fiesta**, which he called the Ford Fiasco.

**(Nicki move to B)**

### **1976 Redux:**

The US vetoes a [UN](#) resolution calling for an independent [Palestinian state](#).

[Apple Computer](#) is formed by [Steve Jobs](#) and [Steve Wozniak](#).

[Jimmy Carter](#) defeats [Gerald Ford](#), becoming the first candidate from the Deep South to win the Presidency since the [Civil War](#), and Ford launches volume production of the [Fiesta](#).

**Jim:** Someone at Ford must have thought the Fiesta was a good idea, like the Volkswagen for America. It was a tin can and had the lightest brakes of any car I'd ever driven. I complained about the brakes when I took the car for a test drive off the lot and was assured that the brakes were in "tip top shape."

This car was a workout for my quads and upper thighs, but it was economical, which I needed after the Oldsmobile.

It was a four-seater and I think it could actually seat four grown-ups. It was a "Hatchback" so there was room in the back for "stuff" like my keyboards and amp. I was in a band called the [Acrylix](#). It got good gas mileage. I think I paid \$700, which is what I had. The insurance payments went down.

**Nicki:** As time went on, the Fiasco started to show her age, mostly

by rusting. First, the floor in the back seat got a small brownish hole and then that hole grew to the extent that the riders in the back could see the road passing under them.

**Jim:** I was fearful that someone might fall out of the back of the car and be run over, so the back became “off limits” to everything except groceries.

(**Jim** move to Keyboards)

**Music cue: PCM-0 1 Latin Jazz**

(**Jim** move to A)

**Jim:** When Nicki and I married, we moved to Maryland, and I had to let the Fiasco go. We donated it to something and some Big Guys took it away. I warned them about the hole in the floor. They didn't seem surprised. I'm sure I gave it to a Good Cause.

*(CUE: Red 1990 Plymouth Laser Turbo)*

**Nicki:** When my husband turned 40, he announced that he either needed to get a red sports car or a mistress. He got the car, a **1990 Plymouth Laser Turbo**. That worked out better for me 'cause I could drive it too.

**1990:**

In [South Africa](#), President [F.W. de Klerk](#) promises to free [Nelson Mandela](#).

The [World Health Organization](#) removes homosexuality from its list

of diseases.

[Iraq](#) invades [Kuwait](#), leading to the [First Gulf War](#), and

On the first web server, [Tim Berners-Lee](#) creates the first web page.

**Jim:** I hit the jackpot with the Plymouth (Mitsubishi, really) Laser (Eclipse, really) This was a true sports car that Mitsubishi made and Plymouth marketed as a Laser, which was a car name that they already had so I'm sure it was a good move on their part. Also on Mitsubishi's part.

This was a tiny car with a rocket booster. It was supposed to be a four-seater, but the back seats were for children or legless people. There was “stowage” in the back. It had a windshield wiper for the back window. It was ridiculously fast. I loved it.

**Nicki:** It was Red. It had a Turbo. It was “The Love Machine.”

**Jim:** We snapped our (then) baby son into the tiny back seat and took off. It had a good radio *and* a tape player! It had heat. It had AC. It was fast. Dudes would mumble “Nice Car” as they sauntered by at the car wash on Kenilworth Avenue. No one had ever given me respect before because of my car. This was heady stuff.

**Nicki:** I liked it, too. I had visions of taking my girl friends to the beach in this car. The only problem was that they couldn't take their legs with them.

**Jim:** Only last year did I donate this car to a Good Cause. I miss it. It was way fun to drive and never, really, let me down. It just got old, like me.

(CUE: 2009 Grey Hyundai Elantra SE)

(**Nicki** speak and move to D)

**Nicki:** Jim's current car is a **2009 Hyundai Elantra SE** from CarMax.

**Nicki:**

**2009:**

[Barack Obama](#) is sworn in as the 44th president, becoming the first African-American to be elected as President of the United States.

The [Icelandic](#) government and its [banking system](#) collapse, and

[Terrafugia](#), a Boston company, begins flight testing *The Transition*, a two-seater airplane that moonlights as a car.

When I asked our mechanic, Vova, if we should buy a Hyundai Elantra or a Nissan Altima, Vova said, “Don't buy Altima – is piece of junk.” He's from Armenia. “You get to 100 thousand miles, falls apart!” So, it was easier to buy a boring Hyundai than get a good new mechanic.

**Jim:** Hyundai Elantra. Sounds fancy, but it's a utility vehicle. Drives good. It's the same grey color all the grey cars are now. Looks like all the same Japanese and Korean cars they sell here. It drives well, is not expensive, is comfortable, gets good mileage.

It's a Car. Just a Car.

(Jim move to Keyboards)

**ALZ: Music: INTA 111 All That Was LOST**

(Jim: Stay at Keyboards)

**Jim:** In In In November  
In No In No no no In November  
of 2 of 2 of 2010...

(Turn down music)

In November of 2010 I I I was I was diagnosed with with with  
Alzheimer's.

An almost impossible word to spell.

I was diagnosed as Early Onset Alzheimer's. A Neuro doc at  
Georgetown Hospital came in, gave me this news, then left.

I thought, for a short period of time, how lucky I was to have had it  
diagnosed early. What good fortune. That must mean that they'll  
catch it quick and I'll be treated early and all will be good.

This wasn't the case. I quickly found out that “early” meant I was  
too young to have this disease.

Which meant that I'd get to live with it for a longer period of time  
since I was so young and Alzheimer's is so unrelenting.

And there was/is really nothing they can do at the early stages except

throw some drugs at me and suggest I would eventually be unmanageable at home, and would, all being well, need to end my days in a nursing home.

Or something like that.

How lucky I was to get it early.

**(Jim move to A)**

**Nicki:** The first and foremost thought in his mind, beyond the obvious, was “WOULD HE BE ABLE TO DRIVE?”

He took a series of tests at Adventist Hospital in Maryland and passed.

**Jim:** I did very well on my live driving test in a Chevy Nova that was donated and tricked out especially for driving tests.

The Chevy had an extra break pedal on the passenger side of the car. It had a lift for a wheelchair on the roof. It was stripped down to be a car that an impaired person could drive with a coach who could stop the car in a pinch.

In my case, the test was stopped early. I did that well.

I signaled when it was time to change lanes.

I signaled for turns.

I looked first left, then right at turns.

I was aware of the speed limits.

I pulled into a parking lot and parked.

I reversed out of the parking space I had just pulled into.  
I looked over my shoulder to see what was behind me as I backed out.

I pulled into a gas station as directed.

I entered and left a traffic circle.

I nailed that test.

**Nicki:** Jim still drives. If he's going beyond our “hood,” he carries a G.P.S. with him. He drives three and a half hours each way to visit his 89-year-old Dad once a month.

**Jim:** For part of the trip, I have to travel on I 95 where there's a lot lot of traffic, some going 90 miles an hour. I stay in the speed limit.

My Dad isn't supposed to drive. He recently scared the driver of a 16-wheeler and we got a call from the Virginia State Police in Petersburg. He's scared the heck out of me a few times.

When I visit, we go to lunch – at the China Buffet or the Piccadilly Cafeteria, and I drive. He's OK with that. I don't know what he does on all the days I'm not there. I don't think I want to know.

The car I drive now is the Hyundai. It 's a car. It's just a car. But for the time being, that's all I need. I have a life. It's just my life. For now, it's a life that has a car in it.

**Nicki:** A life and a wife.

**(Jim move to Keyboards)**

**Out Music: A 079 DINBIN - ALL MY SONS**

– **The End** -

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**Downstage  
(Audience)**

**D**

**A**

**C**

**B**

**Upstage  
(Keyboards)**