

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

JEWEL BOX

Racing cars once had such odd and bewitching names as “Babs,” “Moby Dick,” “Mad Dog,” “Eliminator,” “Scarab,” “Bluebird.”” “Ol Hound,” “Calhoun,” “Big Bertha,” “Green Monster,” “Poison Lil,” “Jewel Box,” “ and “Pandora.”

Pandora was John Cobb’s fowling piece, and Cobb was the Brit, worth a fortune in furs, whose obsession for speed led to his setting, in 1947, the Land Speed Record of nearly 400 mph. In 1952, trying to make himself the fastest man on water as well as land, his speedboat disintegrated, sank, and went to the bottom of the body of water in Scotland said to be inhabited by the Loch Ness monster. Cobb held the LSR posthumously for 16 years, before losing it to the jet tricycle of cowboy rocket jockey Craig Breedlove.

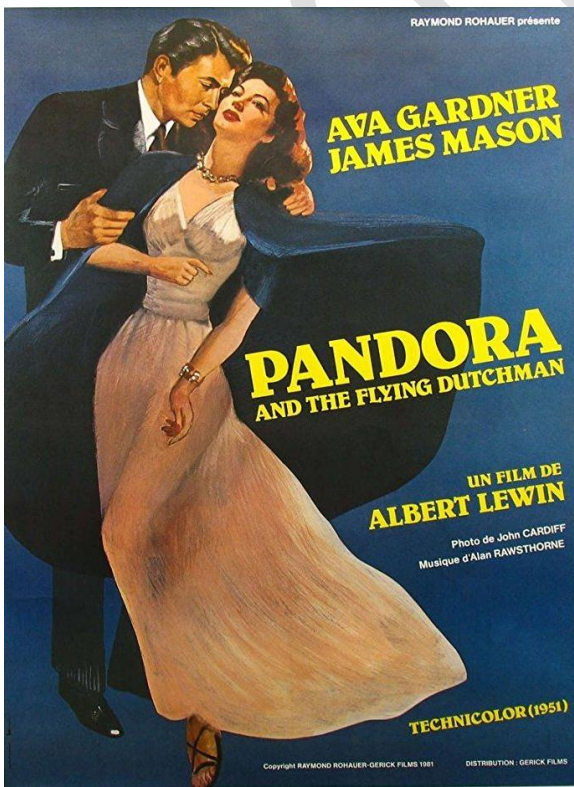
Cobb’s 400 mph LSR streamliner wasn’t named Pandora; Pandora was the name of the open-wheel and heavy-gauge mastodon that Cobb kept handy whenever his tastes ran to going ‘round and ‘round in circles and climbing up on the looming walls of Montlhery on the continent or closer to London at Brooklands.



Photo: Brooklands Museum Photo Archive

So long as Cobb applied no more than quarter throttle, all was well; Pandora behaved herself. More throttle than that hugely complicated matters – Pandora’s huge V-12 airplane engine would take over and make Pandora impossible to keep on the ground.

She set the Brooklands lap record, twice won the Brooklands 500, broke the world’s one-hour record, and never once maimed Cobb. Finally getting out of the speed service Pandora for time did duty testing parachutes.



Her name derives from a 1951 fruitcake of a movie, “Pandora and the Flying Dutchman.” Pandora is almost as great-looking as her co-star, Ava Gardner. Ava at this time was just walking out on Frank Sinatra, and you will well understand how ‘ol blue eyes got his heart broken to bits. Decades afterward, Sinatra was marrying flat-chested Mia Farrow, and, as an act of cruelty, voluptuous Ava sent her regards: “I always knew Frank would end up in bed with a boy.”

In “Pandora and the Flying Dutchman,” Pandora hurtles along a cliff road to the top of a mountain, gets

dropped into the sea and fished out, and, while establishing a desert speed record, catches fire.

Pandora lasted for 21 years. The “Jewel Box,” did a stint of 23.

Ted Horn was a chauffeur for the ages; maybe somebody from this century will at last match his three consecutive Indy cars seasonal titles, and the nine Indy 500s in a row when he never finished worse than fourth. In 1939, requiring a bread-and-butter tool for earning sprint car money on flat tracks, banked tracks, and mile tracks, Horn ordered such a tool. But somehow eccentric builder Harry (“No Hammers”) Lewis mistook bread-and-butter for beautiful. Everything from the sweep of its elegant aluminum hood - the recessed wind shield and fuss-budget dashboard, which was a mini-duplicate of those found on Harry A. Miller’s straight-eight Indy 500 and board track marvels - made the Jewel Box, as Horn is supposed to have named it, well, the Jewel Box.

And then Horn himself went to work, doing things to the Jewel Box’s 220 Offenhauser that might have made the Meyer-Drake people flip out. He re-balanced the crankshaft. He created his own intake manifold. Fuel injection was as yet unknown, and Horn didn’t much like Winfield carbs, so he modified a set of trick Rileys. He used his own exhaust, blended his own racing fuels, and employed 16 different gear ratios. Finally, in a damn-the-costs-lets-be-lightweight move, Horn made up his own magnesium pistons. So fragile they were good for five races, maximum, they weighed a third of what regular Offy pistons did, permitting Horn to haul revs of almost 7,000, in an era when anything above 5,500 was pushing it.

The Jewel Box loved Ted and vice versa. In three seasons they set 62 track records, won 21 features, and took six seconds. In 1948, they were running up a famous string of 23 wins out of 24 starts until Horn interrupted things to go Indy car-racing in Illinois, at Du Quoin, and this was the meet he never returned from. As if remaining in a permanent state of mourning for Ted, the Jewel Box royally dumped on the seven different owners and who-knows-how-many-drivers who campaigned it over the following 14 seasons.

The Jewel Box never should have been left out on the dirt tracks that long. By 1961 it had turned into a hulking, Cadillac-powered terror that some Jackson Pollack had spray-painted fire truck red - axles, wire wheels, tire sidewalls, the works. Campaigning on New York’s Lebanon Valley high-bank, the flabby Caddy mill completely over-powered the all-guts-and-no-brains-bomber at the controls. who, barely 21, was actually a year younger than the Jewel Box. “A slide for life every lap,” grimly recalled said bomber, Mario Gabriel Andretti.

Somebody else – not Andretti – dumped the Jewel Box on its back not long afterward and, mercifully, that was the end of its racing. Discovered in pieces in a New Jersey field in

Piscatoway, the pieces went for a couple of hundred bucks to historian, collector and Ted Horn scholar Bruce Craig, Today, brilliantly restored and brought back to life, the Jewel Box is living up to its name again as part of the McConnell collection in rural Ohio.

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