

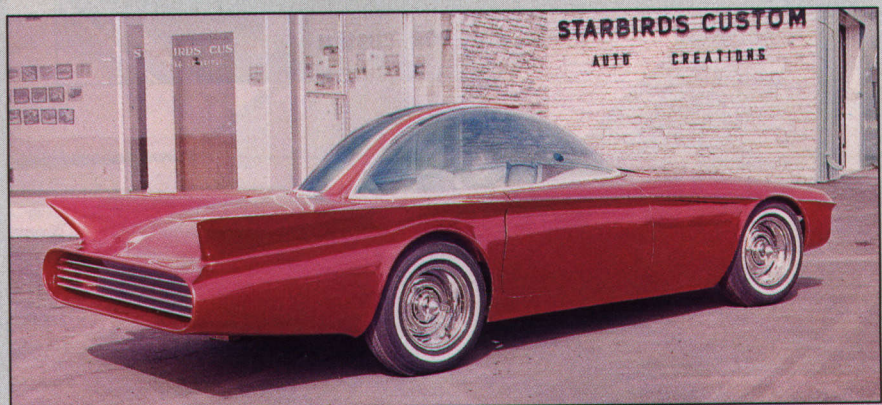
# "PLEASE DON'T TURN OFF THE BUBBLE MACHINE!" OR . . . BUBBLETOP BUILDING SECRETS REVEALED

By **DARRYL STARBIRD**

I did my first bubbletop car, Predicta, in 1959. I was inspired after seeing the Ford Futura dream car, as well as other prototypes and artist's concepts of cars with clear glass tops. When I conceived the design for the Predicta, of course it had to have a full glass bubble-type top. The challenge then became how to build such a top, since this concept was not yet exercised in the custom car world.

I have created 12 bubbletop cars since 1959, including: Predicta; Forcasta; Futurista; Ultra Truck; Scorpion; Bat Car; Cosma Ray; Illusion; Star Ship; and the Bubble Riviera. Ed Roth toured the show circuit with me (and my bubbletopped Predicta) in 1960, with his Outlaw roadster. After instructions from me, he formed his first bubble for the Beatnik Bandit. I also shared my knowledge of bubbletop forms with Bill Cushenbery for his Silhouette in 1962, and later with Dean Jeffries for his MantaRay. After Lustercraft blew my first bubble in Wichita, Kansas, the next 10 or so were blown at Ray Plastics in Los Angeles. The same company was called on by Ed to blow bubbles for his cars as well. The last several bubbles I've had blown were done by Plastic Fabricators, Inc., in Tulsa, Oklahoma. On all occasions, I furnished the tooling for my tops, as shown in this article.

In 1959, my Star Kustom Shop was located in Wichita, Kansas, aircraft capital of the world, home to Boeing, Beech, and Cessna. So, to begin at the beginning, I talked to different plastic contractors in the area who supplied the aircraft industry. Knowing from the start that actual glass was out of the question, the only practical material to build a bubbletop with was Lucite plastic. I guess pure luck led me to Lustercraft, a company specializing in plastic signs. The owner, being a former employee of Bell Helicopters, where he had been involved in the procedure of making tops for choppers out of Lucite.



The Darryl Starbird creation that started his whole series of bubbletopped cars, the "Predicta." The Predicta-style top is one of the two types of bubbles discussed in our story. The two-place Thunderbird-based Predicta is now painted candy blue, and on permanent exhibit at Starbird's museum in Afton, Oklahoma.



Starbird's "Forcasta" is a true double-bubble car, and the second style under discussion here. The car still exists, albeit in greatly altered form, but would be well worth the restoration effort to bring it back.

He explained the process to me and I shared with him my plans for a bubbletopped car, knowing the proper procedure was only the beginning of my problems (although he was very receptive to helping me fabricate my top), as he had no equipment to do it. You see you have to have a big enough oven to heat up a sheet of 1/4-inch Lucite plastic that's 5-foot wide by 10-foot long, to a precise, even temperature. Next, a table or platform has to be fabricated to be the base for the tool. I, at this



A vintage photo of Dick Skulley's double-bubble Squarebird, the "Electra," with Darryl riding shotgun. This car also still exists, but in very bad shape. Hopefully the present owner can be persuaded to part with it before it's too far gone to save. It's part of custom history and deserves to be restored to its former bubbletopped splendor.

point, had to fabricate an insulated steel, gas-fired oven big enough to heat the plastic, and I also had to form a 10-square foot wooden air-pressure table as well.

Allow me to go into detail at this point on how I formed the top on the Predicta. First, I needed to determine the shape of the cockpit area. So, looking down on the car, I duplicated this shape first in cardboard, then, when completely satisfied, onto a 3/4-inch thick sheet of 5x10-foot plywood. This outline was