

NUMBER 1 WITH A BULLET

An AC Cobra with an Asian flavour, the Bullet Roadster was an all-Australian creation.

Words: Mike Ryan Photos: Courtesy of Seller



When you look at the key periods of creativity and ambition in the Australian automotive history, the 1950s and early 1960s were particularly fertile. All manner of smaller players seemed to be bringing new vehicles and fresh thinking to the Australian market - think the Buckle sports coupe, Ascort and Goggomobil Dart, to name a few. Fast forward to the new millennium and there was a similar vibe, with the Bullet Roadster perhaps the best example of this new energy.

IN THE BEGINNING...

The Bullet story is a fascinating one, but also complex, so JUST CARS reached out to Tom Rabold of Bullet Cars, who was generous with his time in explaining how

this Mazda-based creation came to be - and how it evolved.

Started by John Bettini in 1996 (as Bullet Supercars Australia), Bullet initially installed turbocharged 1300 rotary engines into modified first-generation (NA) Mazda MX-5s. In the late '90s, one of these cars was fitted with a 4.6-litre V8 out of a TVR. This required significant modification to the front end, including a separate spaceframe chassis and longer wheelbase, among other changes. This V8 car was essentially the first of the "second series" Bullets, with all subsequent examples also using a V8, but Toyota's 1UZ-FE 4.0-litre quad cam. The chassis was redesigned at the same time, improving build quality and reducing weight.

The two different series are also referred to as the "narrow body" and "wide body" cars, as the latter introduced substantial body mods to accommodate larger wheels and tyres, although the MX-5 body tub remained the same aft of the firewall.

ENTER AEC

The introduction of these Lexus-engined, wide body Bullets was followed by a company called Advanced Engine Components (AEC) coming into the picture.

Based in Western Australia, AEC had purchased Sprintex Supercargers in 1997. "Bullet had approached Sprintex to do the supercharger development in WA," Tom explained. AEC was interested in the Bullet



Extensive body mods include this single-piece fibreglass bonnet.



Sprintex supercharger is of the Roots type, with this addition increasing the V8's power by almost 100kW.

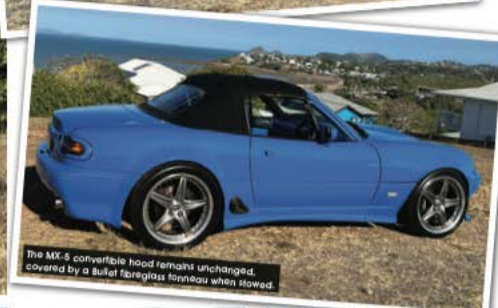
and requested a car be sent over to WA to show the assembly process.

"It was at that point that AEC started negotiating with the then-owners of Bullet to purchase the whole business," Tom added. That purchase was completed in early 2001.

"Once AEC purchased, their goal was to go into some form of mass production," Tom explained. Operations moved from Chinderal on the NSW North Coast to Yatala in Queensland, and a compliance program got underway. This included emissions testing in WA, brake testing in Victoria and noise testing in Queensland.



All but one of the 33 Bullet roadsters built were based on the first-generation MX-5.



The MX-5 convertible hood remains unchanged, covered by a Bullet foreglass bonnet when slowed.



Gauge faces were changed to Bullet-branded items that included a 300km/h speedometer.



ROH 18-inch wheels were standard on the V8 SS. The Roadster V8 got 17-inch wheels.

"These compliance tests were all expensive," Tom added, estimating around \$1 million was spent to ensure cars met ADR approval for low-volume production.

The expense was worth it, with the compliant road cars (that came after approximately half a dozen prototypes) having fit and finish comparable to what Ford and Holden were building at the time.

FAST START

The first Bullet cars produced under AEC ownership were announced at the end of 2001, with a choice of 'Roadster V8' and 'V8 SS' offered. The former was normally

aspirated and the latter supercharged, with a blueprinted engine, revised cam lobes and stronger pistons. The difference in performance was 225kW versus 320kW with

VIC

As with the V8 SS, the V8 SS was priced at \$118,000. Across both options, common features included a five-speed manual transmission, Commodore diff and Brembo calipers on

upside front and rear discs. At 2330mm, the wheelbase was 67mm longer than an MX-5, while a one-piece bonnet allowed maximum access to the V8, the bulk of which sat behind the axle for optimal balance.

The flip front section was part of an extensive body make-over using fibreglass, carbon fibre and kevlar that left only the MX-5 hoodlid and door skins untouched. Individual roll hoops and a removable tonneau cover for the factory cloth hood completed the exterior changes.

In the cabin, a Momo steering wheel and shifter knob, Bullet gauge faces (including a 300km/h speedo) and more supportive sports seats were added. Cabin trim was colour matched to the exterior – orange for orange, blue for blue, etc. – with factory MX-5 features, like power windows, power steering and air conditioning, retained.

EARLY END

While built primarily as a fast road car, the Bullet also punched above its weight in competition, particularly tarmac rallying.



Toyota 4.0-litre V8 is the heart of the Bullet, available in normally aspirated form, or as in this example, with a supercharger to produce 320kW and 525Nm. In the supercharged Bullets, 0-100km/h can be achieved in around 5 seconds, with a 270km/h top speed.



In the cabin, upgrades over the MX-5 donor include leather sports seats, a Momo steering wheel and Momo gear shifter, with colour accents matched to the exterior.

As an example, Bullet entered the 2005 Targa Tasmania with a Roadster V8 (the V8 SS was ineligible) piloted by Rob D'Ercole, with navigator Cameron Reeves. Despite D'Ercole being a Targa rookie and the Bullet unproven in an event of this duration, the car finished 24th outright in a 250-car field.

With a widely praised car and customers willing to pay its six-figure asking price, everything seemed set for AEC to meet their bold plans of producing up to 50 Bullets annually. In the end, they never reached that total across several years of production and the Bullet is largely forgotten today. Why?

"There were more complex complying laws coming in where the vehicle had to be recomplied every year," Tom explained. "That became unfeasible. Continually having to upgrade complying meant it was never going to make a profit. And, sadly, that's the only reason production stopped."

Tom bought the business off AEC and managed to get a few more cars built, but

production came to an end in 2007 after 53 examples left the Yatala works. Of those, only 10 were fully complied to meet ADRs.

OLD NUMBER 1

The V8 SS featured was the first Bullet to be complied – #001 – and was Tom's personal car for a decade before he sold it to a South Australian enthusiast. In 2020, the car came into the possession of the current owner, Queensland-based Ian Reid.

Ian's car history is as extensive as it is impressive. An Audi 505 and RS7 are his regular rides, but his garage has included a Ferrari 430, Lotus Elise, Subaru Liberty RS turbo and a bunch of WRXs, including STi variants and the 'holy grail' 22B (that he sold for more than double what he paid for it), plus a Datsun 1600 powered by a supercharged engine with four times the power of the original. More recently, Ian's developed an affection for Maseratis, specifically the cars produced under Ferrari ownership.

He came across the Bullet completely by chance... "Looking up cars for sale online, I started at 'X' and got through 'B' before stopping at 'Bullet'," Ian recalled. "I thought, 'That's got to be a Bullitt Mustang.' I clicked on it, and all of a sudden, this Mazda MX-5 lookalike came up. I got interested. 'I'd never heard of them and knew nothing about them.'"

"First thing next morning, I rang the number, had a conversation for about 15 to 20 minutes and bought the car!" Some years earlier, Ian had bought a stock Mazda MX-5 for his wife and remembers it as a great little car, but lacking in power. "Imagine if you could have an MX-5 that's got double or three times the power. I think that'd be a pretty amazing car!" Ian laughed.

When it came into Ian's possession, Bullet #001 had covered less than 35,000kms. The engine had been rebuilt approximately 1,000km earlier, so was fresh and ready for Ian's extensive test drive from Melbourne to Yeppoon – a 2,000km trip! This was completed without issue, but Ian is pretty particular when it comes to his cars, so some changes were in order. "I've got to get a car perfect to drive," Ian explained. "If I don't enjoy driving it, I just sell it again."

Those changes, which Ian commissioned Bullet Cars to do, started with softening the suspension and having the flip front bonnet repainted. The five-speed gearbox was refreshed, too, but like the suspension, this was only done to suit Ian's taste.

A Sony touchscreen infotainment system with hands-free functionality was added later, but the rest of the interior is as it was built in 2002, including the colour-matched interior trim.

SOLID STYLE, SOLID DRIVE

The time, effort and money Bullet put into making sure that these cars satisfied discerning driving enthusiasts has paid off, with Ian describing it as a very solid car to drive.

"It's not twitchy, and with the new suspension, it sits on the road really, really well," Ian explained. "It's got an amazing turning circle. Brakes are good, too."

Citing the cabin comfort, Ian added: "You could jump in it and drive from Melbourne to Brisbane, and do it in a day, if you wanted to. It's just a nice car to drive, with a beautiful sound – it's got a really good exhaust note."

Ian describes the driving experience as similar to that of his V8-powered Maserati Spyder and believes that anyone with an enthusiasm for convertibles would be the ideal fit for this car.

Although he's enjoyed this Bullet, Ian says he hasn't been using it enough to warrant keeping it, hence the decision to sell (see breakout).

Along with its performance and appearance, Ian cites the easy availability of parts as another plus with the Bullet. Toyota engine parts, Commodore diff parts and Mazda rear axle parts are all available (and a lot cheaper than Maserati parts, he adds), while the fibreglass body is easy to repair, if needed.

You're also getting a very limited-edition car with this Bullet. Many owners of the normally aspirated cars have since requested superchargers be added, but Tom says these aren't produced to the exact same spec, ensuring the exclusivity of the blown and complied cars.

"What other Australian-made, hand-built car is comparable to a Bullet – that is as good as it? I don't think there is one," Ian said.

For someone who's driven as many outstanding cars as Ian has, that's a strong endorsement!

Thanks to Tom Rabold at Bullet Supercharging for assistance with this article.

Bullet offer supercharger kits to fit a wide selection of late model passenger cars and four-wheel drives, along with intake and exhaust systems, intercoolers, brake parts, suspension and more.

For more details, call (07) 3382 0018 or go to www.bulletecars.com

Thanks to Motor Book World for research material provided for this article. Motor Book World, VIC. Ph: (03) 9830 2644. www.motorbookworld.com.au

FOR SALE

A rare car, this Australian-made Bullet is one of only 10 that are fully ADR compliant.

With three owners from new and just over 50,000km on the odometer, this car has had an engine rebuild and recent gearbox refurbishment, plus suspension tweaks to make it more enjoyable for day-to-day driving. But the 320kW/575Nm can still be unleashed when needed!

The striking electric blue exterior is complemented with a blue accented interior, both of which are in very good condition. Other interior



Bullet extended the MX-5 wheelbase by 67mm to fit the V8.

