

That South Beach Sound You Don't Hear Is An Electric Car

By Michael Azzara, Jr., The Staten Island Advance 1977



South Beach residents were treated last summer to the novel sight and sound of Staten Island's only known home-made electric car.

Ronald B. D'Albero, 23, of Kensington Ave., South Beach, transformed his 1967 Volkswagen fastback sedan from gasoline power to electric power and had it running only six weeks after he purchased it.

"I'm an impatient person," Ron said, "and I had to see it running. I've been continually improving it though."

His "Sweet Pea," as the inscription on the door of the vehicle proclaims, was originally powered by ordinary automobile batteries. Since last spring, when he first brought it out on the road, he has replaced those batteries with six Willard Electric Vehicle batteries, which are more commonly used to power electric golf carts.

Ron, a graduate of Msgr. Farrell High School, earned an associate degree in electrical technology at Staten Island Community College. He has always loved to build electronic devices, and has a home-made electric organ in addition to an assortment of miscellaneous home-grown gadgets.

It all started last March, when he purchased the Volkswagen for \$325. "That was a great price for the condition it was in," Ron said. "It needed engine work - that was perfect!" Ronald D'Albero had no intention of using the car's original 60 horsepower gasoline engine.

At a cost of \$98 the Sweet Pea's electric power plant - once an aircraft starter motor - was imported from Nebraska. The Willard batteries cost approximately \$270 and a set of seven chargers cost about \$200. Add about \$175 for wires switches, solenoids, etc., and the total cost of the transformation was slightly more than \$1000. "If I had hired somebody to do all that it would probably have cost more than \$5000," Ron said. "I did all the labor myself, with a little help from my family and friends. One friend especially, Dave Arnold, who lives in Grant City. He helped take the engine out of the car."

The Sweet Pea's 30-volt D.C. series-wound aircraft starter motor delivers only 10 horsepower, yet can push it

along at a maximum speed of about 50 miles per hour. Ron only uses the first three speeds of his four-speed transmission, since fourth gear saps more current from the batteries, but does not deliver more power.

The Sweet Pea can only average about 12 miles on a single charge. "I am not a highly-paid team of research scientists," Ron said, "It's mostly a novelty, but it does have many practical uses." Staten Island, he pointed out, is not that big, and the range of his vehicle can usually take him where he wants to go. Even if it can't, recharging is a simple matter, since an electric plug which comes out of the engine compartment can be hooked up to any normal house current. Ron carries an extension cord with him at all times for just such an emergency.

One of the novel things about his car is its total silence when not in motion. If not for the panel of indicator lights Ron installed on his dashboard, the only way to tell if the car is on or off is to hit the accelerator and see what happens.

The Sweet Pea has retained its original brakes, steering and suspension. Everything else was either rearranged or extracted, like the back seat which was moved out to make room for the batteries.

Every vehicle in this country must, by law, be registered with its state's Motor Vehicle Bureau, and electric cars are no exception. In order to register an electric vehicle in New York State, you must present the bureau with photographs of the front, rear, and both sides of the car, the weight of the vehicle, and an entire technological data sheet, none of which is necessary for registering a gasoline-powered vehicle.

By figuring the increase in his household electric bill, Ron has calculated the cost of operating his electric car to approximately four cents per mile, which is slightly less than most gasoline powered cars.

If a pea green Volkswagen pulls alongside you at a red light next summer, and its decidedly unnatural whine dies down to utter silence when it stops, wave hello to Ron D'Albero, because that vehicle is none other than the Sweet Pea itself.

