

NUCCIO, WACKY, AND ME



The sleek, sensual shape and inspiring performance of the Arnolt-Bristol so impressed Griff during his test drive that he ordered one for himself!

by Griffith Borgeson

ONE of the most indelible motor-ing experiences of my life was spent at the wheel of an Arnolt-Bristol competition two-seater. The experience extended over almost six years of daily driving, practically every moment of which was a source not merely of satisfaction but of fulfillment. She — *la vettura* taught me what two powerful liters in a tough, sinewy chassis could be — namely, my ideal. For me, she came very close to being a living animal. One sat in her as one sits on a bareback mustang, and she was agile and strong, obedient and faithful. She was instantly responsive to the slightest touch of rein or spur. I would pat her flank fondly as we charged through the fluid air without a ripple. This tactile contact with her sleek skin allowed one simultaneously to feel the extreme fineness of the shape's aerodynamic boundary layer. One moved enclosed in a thin, form-fitting sheath of calm air, a sort of self-generated shelter against the turbulent outer world. She was bewitching, and I would have taken her

into the house at night if the front door's width had permitted. Such was the dynamic side of the creature, and to wax poetic over her is the least that she deserved, then and for all time.

From the static standpoint, the body of the Bolide — for that was the name of the model in question — spoke for itself. It was at once both poetry and sculpture in metal. Obviously it was a paean, a song of joy, inspired by the female human form at its curvaceous best, but interpreted abstractly. Beauty can be enhanced by defects, and a defect in this case was the inherent height of the chassis. This derived from admirably ample ground clearance plus a vertical in-line engine that was in itself quite tall. But the shapers of the form worked around this obstacle with remarkable skill, and the defect was non-existent for the form's occupants and all but invisible from observer eye-level. It was a welded-up heap of mostly steel stampings made on rough cast-iron dies and finished by hand with hammers and files. See the Armor Museum of Torino for the roots of this art.

The whole trip unfolded thus: It was spring, 1956, and I was West Coast Editor of New York-based *Sports Cars Illustrated*, which was to become today's *Car and Driver*. I did much of the magazine's road testing, including that of such fine instruments as the gull-wing Mercedes 300SL, the competition Porsche 550 Spyder, and the Ferrari 250 Testa Rossa, and thus was no stranger to such iron. In April I was assigned to process the stark racing version of the Arnolt-Bristol, an obscure little marque which I had already written a bit about, without having my interest particularly aroused. Rootes Motors in Beverly Hills was handling the virtually nil local distribution and there I collected my well-flogged test car.

The moment happened to coincide with the staging of the annual Pebble Beach Road Race, which I had to attend. By the end of the 800-mile round trip I was the Bristol's slave. I had to have one just like it: no top, no windshield, no wipers, no bumpers, not a solitary frill; just pure machine and pure sculpture. The chassis was basically that of the Bristol Airplane Company's Type 403 saloon which I believe they called "the gentleman's business express." The six-cylinder, three-carb engine was Frazer-Nash's replica of the rocketing BMW 328, tuned to deliver 130 bhp at 5,500 rpm. Wheelbase was a short 96 inches. All-up weight was a substantial 2,475 pounds, equal to 19 pounds bhp, like the Alfa 1900 SS's that were big endurance-race winners at the time. The car would do zero to 60 mph in less than nine seconds. From standstill to 100 mph took all of 28 seconds, by which time the Bolide was

close to its max of 107. Brakes, steering, suspension, handling and road-holding were delicious.

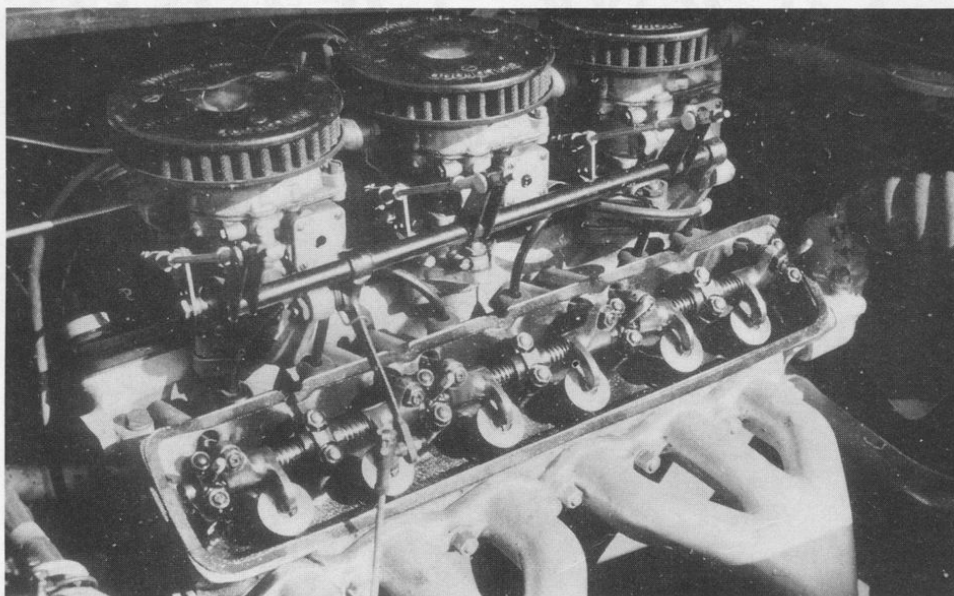
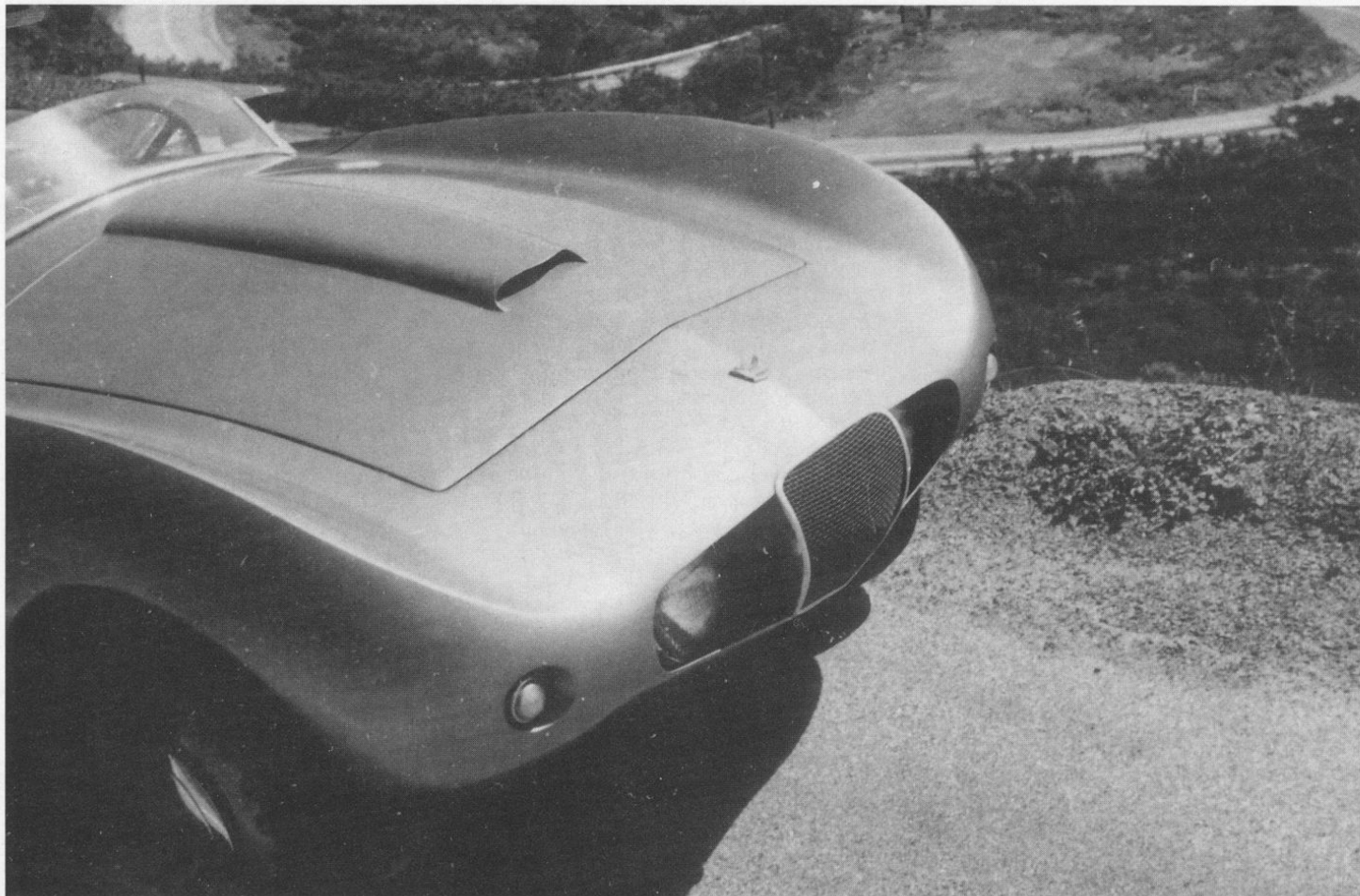
I telephoned the man behind the marque, Stanley Harold Arnolt, better known by his nickname, Wacky, a way of saying "slightly crazy" without pronouncing the words. I told him that I would like to have a virgin car and not one that might have been thrashed by dubious hands. "Then don't go to my retail outlet in Chicago," he said. "Come to my factory in Warsaw, Indiana. I'll let you have a mint car, specially prepared for you in our racing department." Who could ask for more?

It was October 3 when I finally reached the little country town, the pride of which was the three-story factory building of the Arnolt Corporation. Its function as I recall was the transformation of metal tubing into scaffolding and furniture. It was perhaps there that Wacky had made his first foray into the automotive field, manufacturing accessories for MG's. The founder himself received me graciously in his very spacious office, paneled in contrasting squares of plywood. He was a dynamic, youthful 49 years old, stood about five feet ten, and was husky verging on plump. The top of his massive desk was clean, except for a neat stack of papers and a copy of the Holy Bible. There was an electric organ against one wall on which, in the course of our unhurried first encounter, Wacky accompanied himself in singing a couple of hymns. He then conducted me to his racing de-

partment, where the car earmarked for me awaited only the final formalities. I called my host's attention to the fact that the car's silver paint was beginning to peel in certain spots. "Oh, there's no extra charge for that," he quipped jovially, adding that he would send me a can of touch-up paint. I am still waiting for it.

With 2,000 chilly miles ahead of me, I got off to an early start the following morning. There was no separation between cockpit and the space under the rear decklid, and the fumes of leaking raw gasoline soon became alarming. Inspection showed that all of the fuel-line fittings were loose and the filler neck cracked half-way around where it was soldered to the fuel tank. After about half an hour strange effects made me stop and check the wheels. All lug nuts were loose and one was entirely missing. After 500 miles I dutifully had the lubricants changed in gearbox and rear axle. The latter's drain plug fell to the ground when it was touched with a wrench. Aside from these petty annoyances, all went extremely well. There was considerable snow while skimming over the Rockies but, as I knew, the cockpit was agreeably snug. As long as one kept moving at even quite modest speed, snow or rain were deflected over one's head by the low windshield. Then, five weeks and 3,400 miles after Warsaw, the speedometer drive gear came adrift in the gearbox, causing costly damage. But once these details had been coped with the car ran like a train





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continued

for as long as she was mine.

We shared innumerable adventures together. She was the daily workhorse that took me to Tecate, Mexico, for glorious kart grands prix; to the Bonneville Salt Flats for Land Speed Record trials; to Oklahoma where, at a traffic signal, a Blackfoot Indian girl, a rodeo rider, stepped over the door and rode

off with me, she didn't care where. A memorable moment came when I was in Moscow in 1961, on car business. Being an obvious foreigner, I was stopped on the sidewalk by a curious group in their late teens. They wanted to know everything, including did I have a car? "Sure. An Arnolt-Bristol." "What's an Arnolt-Bristol?" "Well, it's sort of a poor man's Ferrari." Response: "What's a Ferrari?"

The most unforgettable experience of all came as I was preparing to emigrate

to Europe. At that time my wife and I lived in the hills just off the Sunset Strip. The Strip is a section of Sunset Boulevard which runs through the northern part of Beverly Hills and is a sort of semi-sovereign enclave carved out of the monstrosity which is megalopolitan LA. One of the consequences of this freak status is that the Strip's traffic is policed by the CHP, the California State Highway Patrol, and not by your local friendly fuzz.

Bill Ziff, owner of a heap of magazines which included *Sports Cars Illustrated*, was staying with us, and we were going out for an innocent bite to eat. Bill was a very big young man but, with my wife Jasmine on his lap, we managed to squeeze into the Bristol well enough for the mere mile which separated us from the restaurant of our choice. We had purred only a few hundred yards down the Strip when we were herded to the curb by a brace of one-ton CHP Harleys. I got out, thinking, "Here we are, caught *in flagrante delicto* with three people in a car built for two." I told the two cops of the buddies I had on the Patrol, without effect. They said nothing of the car carrying an illegal load, but they looked at the windscreen and one said, "Where are your windshield wipers?" I explained why they were unnecessary. They were unimpressed, and wrote. Then they examined the rest of the car, finally slapping a steel tape

against the headlights. While the other officer wrote, the vocal one said, "The legal height of headlights is 24 inches to the center of the lens. Yours are barely 21 inches. You have two months for fixing that and to have a proper windshield and wipers installed. We'll see you in the Beverly Hills Court then. If the car is seen on the street before then it will be impounded." And off they rode.

Installing a pedestrian windshield presented no insuperable problems; it was merely degrading for the car. The headlights were something else: the destruction of its design integrity.

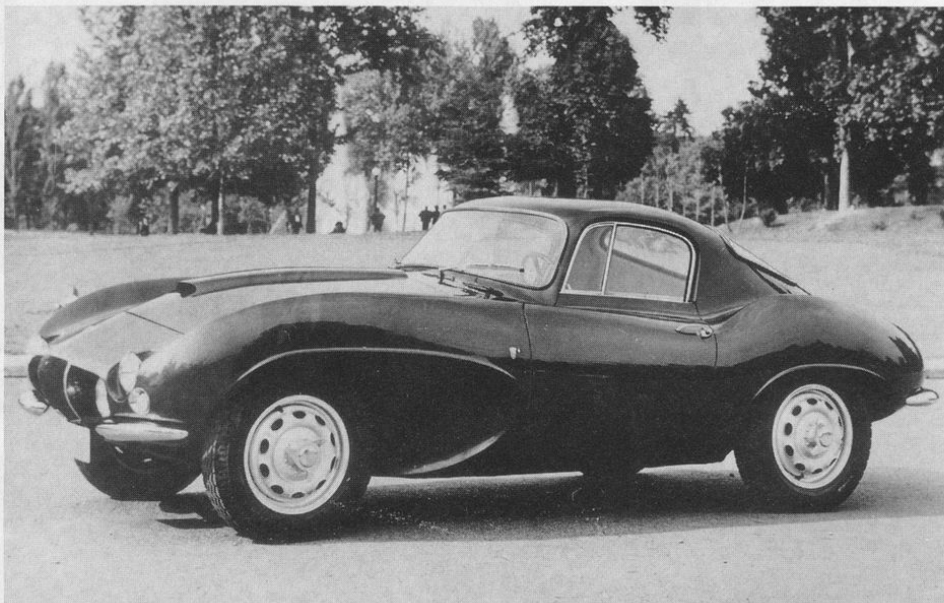
I fumed over this fate for weeks, and then a feeble ray of light broke through: Was that headlight regulation really enforceable? I began checking parked cars everywhere and found illegal ones in abundance. When the time was right I tapped out a letter to the man who would judge me which read: "Your Honor: During a 40-minute period yesterday I measured the following headlight heights in parking lots adjacent to the Beverly Hills City Hall." Then followed a list of license-plate numbers and figures for 24 cars which were in violation of the headlight law. When I arrived at the City Hall the morning of the final shoot-out, what should Providence have parked dead in front of the place but a brand-new '62 Ford Falcon police car. I drew my steel tape and of course found that the BHPD was outside the law. I had complied with the windshield order and the judge dropped the headlight charge, throwing a cold look at one of my CHP guys who was there to see justice done.

The Arnolt-Bristol was among the things I had to leave behind when, in May of 1963 we set up housekeeping in the Torinese hills. The car of course carried the Bertone brand on her flanks, and the first person that I wanted to meet in the city was Nuccio Bertone himself. Our encounters led to my writing what probably was the first detailed biography of this outstanding *carrozziere*; it appeared in *Road & Track* for June 1965. Thus it was from Nuccio's own lips that I learned of the Arnolt-Bristol's decidedly significant role in automotive history.

In 1952 the Italian coachbuilding industry was dying, due to the disappearance of the traditional ladder frame from the domestic car-making scene. "We all languished and awaited our ruin," Nuccio said. The only way to remain afloat was to work with foreign chassis, and in mid-1952 he made a pathetic arrangement with the MG importers in Rome. They would put up two bare chassis and Nuccio would put bodies on them. With luck they might sell both cars and both parties would make a little money. Time would tell, but they weren't counting on it.



Facing page, top: The Arnolt-Bristol in its element. **Below:** 1,971 cc Bristol engine was manufactured by Frazer-Nash and was really a BMW 328. **Above:** "Wacky" Arnolt at his factory between pretty Arnolt-MG and author's car. **Below:** Only two of these stunning Bertone coupes ever saw the light of day.



Nuccio's idea was to produce coupe and convertible versions of a body style that would amount to a modern Italian interpretation of traditional British forms. He had been approached the previous year by a 34-year-old Florentine named Franco Scaglione. Nuccio recalled, "He had no automotive background, but had his heart set on becoming a stylist. He came from a fine old family, spoke four languages, was well read and well-equipped intellectually. I recognized that there was good in him and said, 'I don't know how realizable your ideas may be. But if you will agree to let me make them so, as I wish, I am willing to try working with you.'" The two MG's were the first full-

scale fruit of this collaboration. They were elegant, thoroughly original, and fit for Her Gracious Majesty.

"The morning of the opening day of the Turin Show," Nuccio went on, "a gentleman came up to me — obviously an American, wearing a broad-brimmed hat and high-heeled boots — and asked, 'Did you make these bodies?' 'Yes, Sir,' I answered, and he said 'Bravo!' and hugged me. Then he said, 'I want these cars.' I said, 'The bodies are mine, but the chassis are not. If the distributor really wants to sell the chassis, I'll gladly sell you the bodies.' 'That's not what I'm interested in,' the stranger said. 'What I would like to do

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Arnolt relaxing in his office playing hymns at the Hammond organ. It was one of Wacky's favorite pastimes.

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is buy a minimum of a hundred cars of each type.' Well, I opened my eyes. I had made a deal with the Romans just for possibilities within Italy. I had no thought of getting involved with third parties, and certainly not with the English and the Americans." Thus the elegant Arnolt-MG was born.

Wacky bought chassis in England, shipped them by boat to Genoa, then by truck to Torino for bodies, then to the USA, for sale at last. You had to be wacky to think of such a production lash-up and wackier still to put it to work. In all, Wacky bought about 380 MG bodies from Nuccio, for whom this was an undreamed-of miracle. Early on, the formula proved sufficiently profitable to be applied to Wacky's idea for the Arnolt-Bristol, of which about 180 units were made.

"This was nice work for us," Nuccio told me. "We were right in the midst of it when the top man at Alfa Romeo came to us. He had observed the Arnolt operation and had decided that if anything that cumbersome and inefficient could work, there must be something in it for the home industry. But it was the Americans who discovered the Italian coachbuilders. It was truly thus. We were the first, then Pininfarina, then Ghia, then Vignale and the rest. Without that discovery we never would have been able to interest our own manufacturers."

On the strength of what Bertone had done with the Arnolt-Bristol, Alfa

commissioned Nuccio to develop a small-series production body to go on the two-liter Disco Volante prototype chassis. The change in company policy in favor of volume production brought that project to a halt, replacing it with the spectacular BAT series of highly aerodynamic experimental one-offs. They were, as anyone can see, direct descendants of the Bertone/Scaglione formal idiom, the first manifestation of which was the Arnolt-Bristol. Appropriately enough, when the first BAT (for Bertone Aerodinamica Tecnica) had served its scientific purpose and was sold, Wacky was the purchaser. The BAT series led to the Giulietta Sprint and the staggering production run that catapulted the house of Bertone into the position of world prominence which it has occupied ever since. Then in 1957 came the masterpiece which was the Sprint Speciale, a BAT without the wings. Franco's subsequent work at Bertone did not come up to his previous standard and he left the firm in 1959, after which he did little else of favorable note.

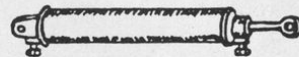
Wacky Arnolt died the day before Christmas in 1963, at the much too early age of 56. I saw Nuccio shortly after that. "I'm very sad over his death," he said, "because he was a great friend and because he did so much good for our business. What we were capable of doing and, above all, our taste, were not understood at home. But he understood those things immediately. Without that we would not have had the development that we have known." Nuccio used the "we" in the collective as well as the personal sense. □

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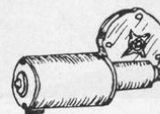
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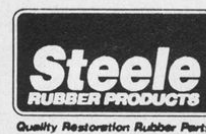
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