

WON DERS IN 1-SHOT



Artist Profile: Jimmy C

BY PAT GANAHL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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Old Painters Never Die
15" x 27", 1-Shot enamel over candy lacquer on oil
drum

JIMMY CLEVELAND HAS AN INFECTIOUS LAUGH. And he laughs alot. He also goes by the name Jimmy C because he's a pinstriper, and stripers have to have nicknames. Actually, calling Jimmy C a pinstriper is highly inadequate. He is an excellent and effortless striper, no doubt about that. But he is a gifted artist in several other media, as well. And, as is so often the case with pinstripers and other artists, his story has plenty of twists and turns, some strange, some serendipitous.

Jimmy was born in Albuquerque, and from a young age both his parents and an aunt encouraged him towards art. Jimmy notes that New Mexico is an artsy state. The aunt gave him his first easel before he was six. Through school, Jimmy took lots of art courses. He also took courses at summer school, hobby shops, and museums. But this art had nothing to do with Ed Roth, Rat Finks, or hot rods. Jimmy was primarily interested in what we call "southwestern" art—wildlife, landscapes, Indian stuff—and he was doing it in water colors, oil paints, charcoal, and ceramics.

But New Mexico was also a cold state; too cold for Jimmy's dad, who was a heavy equipment operator (as in road-building equipment). So the Cleveland family headed for the deserts of Arizona.

In answer to why he wasn't painting Rat Finks at an early age, Jimmy quips: "When Ed Roth was in Maywood drawing Rat Finks, I was living on the Hopi Indian reservation, riding donkeys." In fact, Jimmy was the first white kid, at about age six, to attend the small Christian school atop Second Mesa. He says he'll never forget watching his young classmates and their fathers doing snake dances (with live snakes) and other rituals. "But we were buddies, because we were just kids."

Eventually Jimmy's dad's jobs led to Salome, basically a gas station stop on old Highway 60 between Quartzsite and Wickenburg, and 50 miles southeast of Parker on the Colorado river. By the way, it's pronounced in two syllables, not three. This is where Jimmy went to high school, got married shortly thereafter, and started working.

From this point on, I'm not sure how to proceed because, as I say, the story has some surprising twists and





Jimmy Cleveland was not only responsible for the pinstriping on the front cover of the *Kustom Kulture* catalog, but the painting on the rear cover as well.

turns. Let's jump ahead a bit in time. Jimmy's family has moved to Parker. Jimmy is still in Salome, but is now working as a powder monkey in a gold mine north of town (that's the guy with the dynamite, he explains). It's Christmas, and Jimmy goes to Parker for Christmas dinner with his family. Jimmy's younger brother happens to be working for a local sign painter known as Michael B. (who happened to be a "drinkin' buddy" of Jimmy's dad). Jimmy went to pick up his brother, but got there half an hour early. He got to talking to Michael B., and before the brothers left, Michael had offered Jimmy a job.

Now let's back up a bit. By then Jimmy knew who Ed Roth was, because one of his hobbies in the late '60s and early '70s was building model cars. "I was a Beatnik Bandit model building fool back in '68," he says. He'd detail them, wire them, "and liked winning trophies at the

county fair." But when it came to real vehicles, though he had a '29 highboy roadster for a couple of years, his real love was trucks, vans, and motorcycles—especially the off-road type.

Well, Parker happens to be the starting point for a major SCORE off-road race, and the race was about a month away when Jimmy showed up at Michael B.'s sign shop to pick up his brother. The place was full of off-road pickups, dune buggies, helmets, and so on that needed lettering and striping. That's one reason why Michael needed to hire more help. "I just love that stuff," says Jimmy. "I fell in love with it right away." But he says he was also attracted by the 1-Shot lettering paints. Jimmy had painted a couple of signs as part of an old restaurant restoration he had worked on, but he had never used the bright, shiny lettering paints or brushes. He had never dreamed about pinstriping.

So he moved to Parker and went to work for Michael B. He said mostly what he was doing at first was prepping and design work. "But the sign design, and doing the colors, and all that just really attracted me—really got me going." But in the next two years Michael B. taught him everything he could, including pinstriping and lettering. Jimmy said he'd practice pinstriping for hours "Because I really enjoyed it," painting on pieces of glass, and then wiping it off and starting over. When I asked him what style of striping he did, he didn't have a ready answer. "There really wasn't much to go by out there. I might see something in a magazine. I'd just make up my own designs."

But after two years, Michael B. decided to retire and move out of town, handing the business, clients, and tools over to Jimmy. He opened a small shop on the Parker strip, where he has been very busy doing signs, lettering, and striping ever since, including the off-road racers and the hundreds of ski boats on the river.

1-Shot Forever
13" x16". 1-Shot enamel hand painted on gypsum plaster



Dragnut
15" x27". 1-Shot enamel over urethane metalflake on oil drum

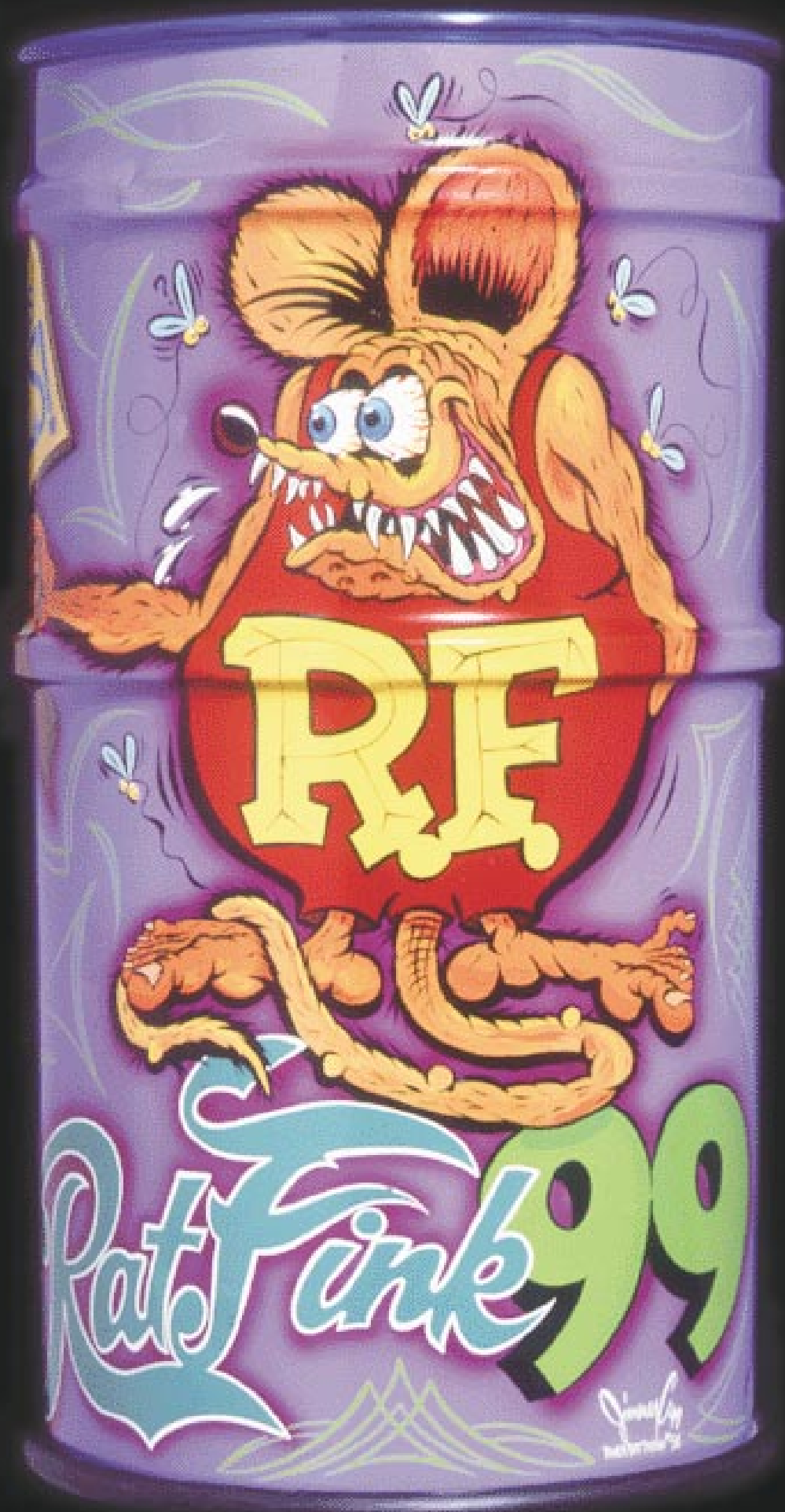
Jimmy C had at one point purchased 100 oil drums. Of these only 50 have proven ding free and worthy of paint and pinstripe. Quite a few have found homes in the hands of Japanese collectors. The detailed pinstripe design on this oil drum is particularly impressive. Ed Roth painted the Dragnut figure on the front of this can as a gift to Jimmy.



Mooneyes Rules

15" x 27". 1-Shot enamel over urethane on oil drum

This can was painted specifically for the Rat Fink Reunion held at the Mooneyes facility in Santa Fe Springs, California in December of 1999.



Now let's throw in some odd occurrences. It was December of 1984, Jimmy had to go to "the coast" (somewhere in Southern California) to do an airbrush job with a friend on a Saturday. On Friday, Jimmy read in a magazine that Roth's Rat Fink Reunion, then held at Kim Dedic's striping shop in Fullerton, was to be the following night. On the spur of the moment, he decided to go. He and his friend knocked out the airbrush job the next day, and drove to Fullerton, getting there about 8:00. This was the first time Jimmy met Ed, and it was the first time he saw him painting Rat Finks on trash cans (which Ed started doing about this time, to auction off at the end of the party to raise money for a children's charity). It was also the year that someone showed up in a rented Lincoln Mark VII that everyone pinstriped that night. Jimmy and his friend stayed until 2:00 a.m. and said the party was still going strong when they left (I know; I was there, too, taking pictures).

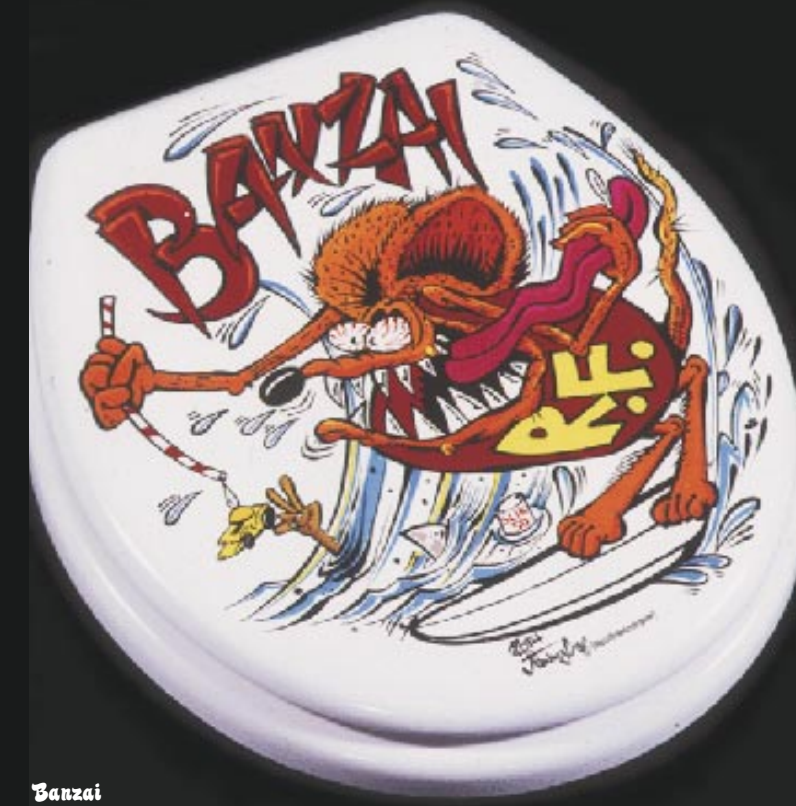
Now, you're probably not going to believe this part. Jimmy said there was this guy there named Von Dutch that everybody was making a fuss over. Jimmy swears that, until then, he'd never really heard of Von Dutch or seen his style of striping.

But there's more. You may recall that for a period in the early '70s, Dutch, his then-wife, and two daughters moved out to Arizona. When Jimmy visited Michael B. a couple of years ago and mentioned Dutch, Michael told him: "I don't think I ever told you this, but Von Dutch and I had sign shops a block apart in North Phoenix. We used to go bowling on Friday nights, us and the wives, back in the '70s." Can you picture that?

After that first Rat Fink Reunion, Jimmy said, "Immediately, upon returning from that trip, I painted my shop trash can. It was a plastic one. I still have it. Put a Rat Fink on it, with some striping." I'm not sure if it was the very next year, but for the next Rat Fink Reunion he went to, Jimmy painted two cans, one for himself and one for the auction. The one that sold at auction went for about double what other cans were going for. The guy who bought it was Greg Escalante, ex-surf champ, art collector, and patron of the Laguna Art Museum. He was also the instigator of the Kustom Kulture show there in 1993, but we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves.

After Jimmy C's first Rat Fink trash can sold, he says, "The next year everybody was calling up and wanting one of those things." Including Ed Roth. "Most of the cans I did Roth bought himself. Then he'd paint a little more on them and sell them at shows."

Since the days of Robert Williams and Ed Newton, Roth has had "apprentices" doing artwork for him. After Ed realized he could only airbrush so many shirts an hour, he started printing them. Ed can airbrush, stripe, letter, and paint, but he doesn't do ink. So he gets others to do it for him. Plus these days there are comic books, posters, and other stuff. Ed has several "helpers" around the country working for him—has for years. Some are known to the



Banzai

16" x14". 1-Shot lettering enamel on plastic toilet seat

While travelling the car show circuit with Ed Roth, Jimmy Cleveland would go to the closest Home Depot and buy toilet seats in bulk. Cleveland and Roth would then paint them on site per customer's requests. No mere showpiece, Banzai is indeed functional art. In fact, it was unbolted from the Cleveland family toilet just for our photo shoot.

public, others aren't. Many go on to make a name for themselves, outgrowing the Roth ties. Ed encourages this.

Now, back to the Kustom Kulture show at the Laguna Art Museum. About 1991, Escalante and Craig Stecyk started laying plans for a show about the art of Von Dutch, Ed Roth, and Robert Williams, and how they influenced '60s artists such as Robert Irwin and Billy Al Bengston, plus a new crop of young artists like Coop, Pizz and Georganne Deen. Most major art shows have an accompanying book, called a "catalog," explaining or amplifying the works in the show. For an art director for the Kustom Kulture catalog, they selected Jeff Girard, the same guy who is art director of *The Rodder's Journal*. Jeff decided he wanted a pinstripe design for the cover of the book, and Escalante suggested Jimmy C to do it. He not only did a very intricate pinstripe for the cover, but also flamed lettering for the title, a Rat Fink/Coochy Cooty/flying eyeball painting for the rear cover, and had a couple of photos of the trash can that Escalante bought inside. (By the way, this book, titled *Kustom Kulture*, is still available from Last Gasp publishing in San Francisco, CA. To further the coincidence, I wrote one of the chapters in this book and supplied several of the photos.)

Jimmy says he first encountered Von Dutch striping at the Rat Fink Reunions. "I saw Dutch doing it first-hand." But he says it was the Kustom Kulture show that taught

I Love You Baby

15" x 6", I-Shot enamel,
airbrushed over gypsum plaster

Reminiscent of the Rat Fink figurines of the past, Cleveland has added his own twist to hot rodding's favorite monster. One unique aspect of this technique is that he thins and then airbrushes the I-Shot enamel. Jimmy C discovered inexpensive lamp components while in Home Depot purchasing the aforementioned toilet seats.



Von Dutch Tribute

15" x 27", I-Shot enamel over urethane on oil drum

Jimmy C's tribute to Von Dutch features his own version the ubiquitous flying eyeball.





Rat Fink Flavor
20" x 11 1/2". 1-Shot enamel over urethane on oil drum

For his daughter Sommer's 10th birthday, Jimmy C painted her with Rat Fink on a smaller sized oil drum. It has served as Sommer's personal trashcan for the past seven years.

him more about Von Dutch: "Actually, the Kustom Kulture book was a real insight to his style of artwork." And he adds that this book "Is what got my name out."

Not long after this—in fact it was the year Ed was touring his new Beatnik Bandit II—Jimmy hooked up with Roth to do the car show circuit in the western part of the country. Besides T-shirts, posters, and whatever else Ed was hawking, Both Ed and Jimmy would be painting Rat Finks or other monsters/cars on trash cans or whatever else the customers might have, splitting the profits. For a while, Jimmy C was the "official" Roth Rat Fink artist. There have been several, but it's currently a complicated subject that we won't delve into further. Suffice it to say that Jimmy is working to broaden his visibility as Jimmy C, and Ed encourages that.

I'm being vague here on purpose, and it reflects on Jimmy—once again—only by strange coincidence. Jimmy's partner of the last four or five years is a vivacious lady named Dena Lux, who matches Jimmy's contagious laughter perfectly. Dena and her twin sister Adele were born and raised in the beach town of San Clemente, California (which is also the home/studio of our art director Jeff Girard—see how this is working?). Adele Lux was hooked up with Ed's son, Dennis Roth, for something like seven years. That's how Jimmy met Dena. Dennis and Adele came by Ed's booth at an ISCA show in Tucson; Dena was with them, and Jimmy was working in the booth. There's lots more to it, including the fact that Dennis' mother, Sally (the first Mrs. Roth) lived in the other half of Dena's duplex, and that Dena and Debra Kellogg Osuna have been putting on an Auto/Art show in Dana Point for the last five years, at which Ed has appeared. There's more, but there isn't room.

When I interviewed Jimmy last week, he and Dena and Jimmy's 17-year old daughter Sommer were just moving into a new house on the San Clemente hillside overlooking the ocean. Jimmy currently divides his time between here and Parker, Arizona, where he still has a house on the river and keeps plenty busy with his sign/lettering/stripping business. "I'm always one to two years behind out there," he says. In the meantime, however, he's been doing more striping, artwork, and sculpture out of his small studio in San Clemente. The sculpture, which he has been concentrating on lately, comes by way of coincidence, too. When Jimmy got married fresh out of high school, his wife's family had a garden sculpture business: statues, fountains, bird baths, tables, that sort of thing, molded in concrete. "It was very physical," he says, but it taught him the molding process. For the stuff he does now, he starts with a sketch, then sculpts it in clay, makes a silicone mold over it, then casts them and paints them.

At one point in the conversation I stopped and said, "So this [the artwork] has all come sort of lately?" Jimmy's immediate reply was "Definitely!"

Then I asked what's next. It turns out, again through some coincidences, that Jimmy is working after hours at a



Soul Surfin'
61" x 16 1/2". 1-Shot enamel on surfboard

Two knife fighting eyeballs, good and evil, battle out on the nose of this surfboard which hangs in the office of our art director, Jeff Girard.

place called Dinamation that makes huge "robotic" creatures—dinosaurs, dragons, insects—up to 40 feet long, that are programmed by computer to move very realistically. Jimmy's been sculpting the bodies for them. But his idea is to use the same technology to build some bubble-top robotic cars, what he refers to as "drivable art." He says he has sketches for a couple already. "Can you imagine having one of these things in a car show, and the bubble goes up and down, the hood opens, the wheels turn, all on their own?" Well, kind of reminds me of some Roth cars I saw at shows in the '60s—and this is probably not a coincidence.

Come to think of it, there may be a lot of coincidences in Jimmy Cleveland's life, but I don't think his artistic talent is one of them. It's talent.