

# WHEELS'05

Welcome to the New Automotive Era: Muscle is in, Titanic-  
e rides are out, and beating the gas pump is all the rage

T DRIVE // PAUL WALL



## Subaru WRX STI



PRICE \$32,995 (as tested)

ENGINE 2.5-liter turbo, 300 hp

PAUL WALL, A BIG MAN IN A BIGGER T-shirt, is tapping at his Sidekick when the car arrives outside his Manhattan hotel. He looks up and flashes his glittering grille, eyeing the ride with something like amusement.

"A Subaru?" says Wall, the Houston rapper whose slow-sizzle major-label debut, *The Peoples Champ*, was released last month and marched directly to the top of the charts. "I was thinking Bentley or Ferrari, and you brought me a Subaru?"

But it's not just any Subaru. It's the Impreza WRX STI, a factory-tuned race car that hardly differs from the version that regularly tears up the European rally circuit. The all-wheel-drive, turbocharged WRX marks the culmination of the *Fast and the Furious* tuner movement, in which kids took anonymous four-cylinders and modified them into high-performance machines — only here, Subaru has already done the work for them.

Wall ambles over to the sparkling blue car — with its massive spoiler, hood scoop and gold rims that match his teeth — and plops down in the driver's seat, fixating on the six-speed shifter's titanium knob.

"Dude, I don't drive no stick."

And so Wall rolls over to the passenger seat. Today's test driver will be Wall's bodyguard, Chuck, a beefy guy in a red and silver tracksuit.

At home in H-town, Wall favors big, easygoing rides like Lincolns and Caddies; even his new car, a Mercedes CLS55 AMG, rarely breaks the speed limit. "I'm not in a rush," he says in his Texas drawl. "Drive slow, baby."

Instead, Chuck immediately floors it, and soon we're cruising through town at three times the legal limit. Crossing Ninth Avenue, the car catches air, flying over a coffin-size bump in the road. "This is all stock, right?" Chuck asks. "Shit is fast!"

Chuck's turn at the wheel done, he hands over the keys to his buddy Tim, another member of Wall's entourage. Tim heads toward the West Side Highway, and the boost gauge wiggles wildly as the car roars forward. "Man, that's the all-wheel drive," Tim says, referring to how the car doesn't produce burnouts at the starting line. He darts in and out of heavy midday traffic, popping into the tiniest of gaps and closing on cars with ease.

"Going down in the Subaru!" Wall yells, laughing. "How fast you going?"

"I don't know," Tim answers. "I'm just trying to watch the road!"

Safely back in front of the hotel, Tim and Chuck pop the hood and inspect the engine, an aluminum-alloy block that's one of the lightest on the market. Wall gives the car a final look.

What do you think?

"Not my style," he says. "But whatever, it's all good."

JOSH BEAR

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# Honda FCX Fuel Cell



**PRICE** Lease only \$500 per month; approx. value \$1 million

**ENGINE** Permanent magnet AC synchronized motor, 107 hp

IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE A MILLION-DOLLAR CAR, AND IDLING on a leafy San Fernando Valley street, it doesn't sound like one, either. Actually, the Honda FCX doesn't make any sound at all. That's because the FCX, the first production fuel-cell prototype in the U.S., emits only warm-water vapor. Actress Kristen Bell, the tough-talking teenage sleuth of UPN's cult hit *Veronica Mars*, puts her hand under the tailpipe and rubs the wet air between her fingers. "That is so rad," she says. "I can't believe it has no emissions."

Pollution is something that the twenty-five-year-old takes very seriously. In the petite blonde's L.A. home, Ziplocs are reused, recycling is paramount, and under no circumstances is water to be left running while doing dishes, brushing teeth or shaving. The only thing that niles her as much as conservation is animal rights—which is why it's also verboten in the Bell household to kill a bag.

Bell buckles herself in and presses the accelerator. The FCX starts forward with only the tiniest whoosh, like the faint sound of an airport tram leaving the station. "I want this thing," Bell says. "I'd drive it everywhere."

That might be tricky. At the moment, just twenty-two people on the planet (including fifteen Americans) drive these two-door hatchbacks, under special \$500-per-month leases offered by Honda as part of its ongoing R&D on the car. Los Angeles,



POLLUTION CRUISADER  
BELL IN THE ULTIMATE  
GREEN MACHINE

in fact, is one of the few cities with hydrogen filling stations capable of replenishing the fuel cells, which under optimum conditions can provide nearly 300 miles of driving.

**"I want this thing. I'd drive it everywhere."**

Like a traditional hybrid, the FCX is actually propelled by an electric motor; the fuel cells merely power it. And also like a hybrid, it stores energy generated during braking. But the FCX doesn't have the pod shape or funky instrumentation of first-generation hybrids such as the Toyota Prius. It looks like a Civic, with a few feet sawed off the back.

"It has such a cute color scheme—I like the microsuede

and this mesh stuff," Bell says, referring to the purple seats. "It feels like I'm driving in a big North Face bag."

Approaching a light that turns from yellow to red, she brakes hard and comes to an awkward stop in a crowded intersection. "Great brakes!" she says, giggling. To our right is another car, who's clearly pissed to find this silent car blocking the way.

Bell laughs. "What if I'd hit him? It's like, 'I love you, but I really don't like old people. It's per se, ruin the environment. Kill all the people, and even better!' Then she smiles sheepishly and yells out the window—which is closed—"I'm sorry! It's a fuel-cell car. We're just passing the intersection, but we're not polluting!"

## MY DREAM RIDE

GERARD WAY OF MY  
CHEMICAL ROMANCE  
1980'S-ERA PONTIAC  
FIREBIRD



"I like the one in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* that gets smashed up. The exterior should look broken in."



Go-karters like these reach speeds up to 55 mph.



Next big thing: Jake Crum

## Nascar Kids

How today's go-kart prodigies are becoming tomorrow's stock-car kings

The future face of Nascar is a strawberry-haired speed freak who has competed in more than 700 races, been called one of the best drivers ever by Nascar driver Mark Martin and goes by the nickname "the Snake." But Jake Crum can't even reach the pedals on a professional stock car—he's a fourteen-year-old middle-schooler. Still, he's a star on the go-kart circuit, in which teens and preteens race around quarter-mile ovals at speeds of up to 65 miles an hour, buckled into 200-pound chromoly steel karts about the

size of a bathtub. Crum is catching the attention of Nascar at a time when teams are desperate to replenish their ranks with young phenoms—who can drive like hell, even if they're too young to drive legal.

The craze for speed kids began last year when Rick Hendrick, the owner of five-time Nextel Cup-winner team, signed fifteen-year-old former karter Austin to a development deal. Then owner Jack Roush picked up fifteen-year-old Marc Davis. "We've been the unofficial training ground of Nascar," says Randy Kugler, the president of the World Kart Association. He lists Nascar drivers like Jeff Burton, Tony Stewart and Brian Vickers, all of whom got their start from karting. But what used to be a rung on the ladder to racing's upper echelon has now morphed into a very own minor league. These days, the 125 sanctioned go-kart tracks are deluged with prodigies.

Like Charlie Patterson, all of them eager to sign up the next day. "Nowadays in racing, your sell-by date is about twenty-three," Patterson says. That fact hasn't been lost on Nascar owners, who realize their drivers will soon speed past their prime. The competition for new blood is so intense that one team owner, Chip Ganassi, recently admitted he'd even sign up a seven-year-old—the right seven-year-old, that is, one who is on the prowl for marketable athletes to develop in a national pastime that thrives on corporate sponsorship. "I don't bother with anyone who has crazy hair or tattoos," says Patterson. "I'm looking for a kid who's a natural and says 'Yes, sir' and 'Yes, ma'am.'" Crum definitely fits the bill, and he's already studying pro drivers in the hopes of emulating their success. "I watch for the ones who look smart," he says. "I'm not sure I know what it looks like."

MANVY



TEST DRIVE // DANE COOK

# Pontiac Solstice



PRICE \$19,995 (as tested)

ENGINE 2.4-liter inline-4 POWER 177 hp

"IT'S GOT A REALLY NICE ASS."

Dane Cook is standing under a row of towering palm trees in Beverly Hills, giving the Pontiac Solstice the once-over. "You want to hate it because it's a Pontiac, but you can't," says the thirty-three-year-old comic, displaying none of the manic stage persona that helped his second CD, *Retaliation*, become the highest-charting comedy album in a quarter-century. Today, Cook is gravelly voiced and laid-back, decked out in a dark cap and Elvis shades and slightly distracted by an afternoon *Levi's* appearance for which he hasn't yet prepared. He strolls to the front of the car, an Americanized version of a classic British roadster, lingering near the rounded, mesh-grilled front reminiscent of an old Lotus. "Damn," he says.

Earlier, Cook had swung the car down Sunset Boulevard, its throaty exhaust reverberating off the overgrown walls below the Chateau Marmont. Ahead, a red version of the very same car loomed on a poster that covered the entire side of a building. Pontiac is clearly thinking big, and if the enthusiastic response of Angelenos is any gauge, the strug-

gling brand may finally have a hit. The low-slung Solstice, with its broad hood and sculpted sides, is undoubtedly a bigger head-turner than this year's other classic roadster, Mazda's MX-5 Miata. When we zipped past, kids waved and girls snapped photos. As Cook points out, "You can't go wrong with a classic convertible. I'd drive a 1978 Ford recall, if you could throw the top back."

Actually, Cook's current ride is a convertible—a Lexus SC 430 with a retractable hardtop—but he worries that the Solstice might be too much of a chick car for him. Anyone over six feet will have difficulty folding themselves into the bucket seats and fitting behind the low-altitude windshield. You don't realize just how low to the ground you are in a Solstice until you stand next to it—or pull up alongside, say, an Escalade. You feel a bit like a bug just waiting to be squashed.

**"I don't see how sex in this car is possible."**

"I don't see how sex in this car would be possible," Cook says, lounging on the car's trunk. "Fun fact for ya: First car I ever got beat in? Corvette. It was old and beat-up—the worst-condition 'ette I've ever seen. Someone should have been punished for treating it like that. I was seventeen. It was behind a supermarket. Real classy."

Time is waning. We hop back in the car and head to Cook's West Hollywood home. "You know what?" he says, handing over the keys. "I let it out a little bit coming up Hacienda. It's got zip. I didn't think it'd have any power, but it did." He ponders the cute little roadster a few seconds longer. "They'll probably sell millions of them." **JOSH DEAN**

"YOU CAN'T GO WRONG WITH A CLASSIC CONVERTIBLE," SAYS COOK.



An engineer guards a new Lexus model; workers hide the new Saturn Outlook (inset) from prying cameras.



## The Rise of the Auto Paparazzi

**How car-spy shooters capture hot rides of the future**

Brenda Priddy regularly battles extreme weather and squirrely automakers to photograph new cars while they're still in development. But sometimes she just gets lucky, like when she recently spotted a 2007 Ford Edge SUV that was getting tested near her Arizona home. She immediately drove after it. "I don't get involved in chases," Priddy says, "but we got a lot of pictures as the car was speeding away from us."

Welcome to the world of car-spy photographers, who are to Detroit what celebrity shutterbugs are to Hollywood. Auto paparazzi can sell shots of an especially noteworthy car to magazines for up to several thousand dollars, an incentive that often leads to desperate measures. Jim Dunne, who arguably invented the niche market in the Sixties, allegedly once rented a helicopter to view a new Corvette he couldn't capture on the ground. Other photographers lurk outside test tracks, enduring 120-degree heat in Death Valley (where cars

undergo hot-weather and subzero winters in Sweden-cold-weather testing).

Priddy, the doyenne of photographers for this sport, says it takes a practiced eye to spot so-called test mules. Prototypes are concealed with fiberglass panels or vinyl or even car tape with fiberglass panels underneath. "The first time I saw the VW Touareg was a M-Class body," Priddy happened to be with a carmaker. "That's no Mercedes."

"I tend to think of it as an and-mouse game," says spokeswoman Jennifer Priddy, who sells car-spy photos. Priddy at outsmarting carmakers to recent "gets" such as shots of the redesigned Civic and the Bugatti Veyron. "The ones that draw the most real sexy stuff—the Ferraris, the Porsches," says Moto. Matt Stone, whose magazine runs at least four spy issues. "Nobody gets close to what a new mini is like." **TOM**

### MY FIRST RIDE



MISSY ELLIOTT  
LEXUS GS 300

"After I hit a deer with it, I learned that I need to keep my eyes on the road."