

Celebrity Cat

'Everybody Loves Raymond' Star Looks to Youth for Latest Set of Wheels

By Carl Graziano

Actor and comedian Ray Romano recalls the mid-1970s—long before the contracts and Emmy awards and financial means to have almost any car he desired—when his brother's '69 Cougar was off-limits and his regular ride was, well, somewhat less impressive.

"My father had a Ford Falcon that he bought for \$50, and he fixed it up and had it for 10 years after that, and that was the car I had to drive around in with girls, whatever," says the 44-year-old star of television's "Everybody Loves Raymond." "Now, you find one of those in nice condition, it's a cool thing. But it wasn't cool back then."

Meanwhile, Romano's older brother, Richard, was wooing dates with the Cougar, a car Ray Romano could only admire from afar. "It was one of his first cars," Romano says, speaking in a recent telephone interview. "He got it used. This was about 1975. And I just loved it and never really got to drive it. He

would never really let me use it."

Fast forward to 2001. Now, a successful comedian, actor and writer, Romano got an itch to drive the car he once coveted as a teen-ager growing up in New York. "It just became something that, now, in the position that I am, financially, I don't have a lot of toys," he says. "Throw in a little bit of midlife crisis, and that's your answer, right there."

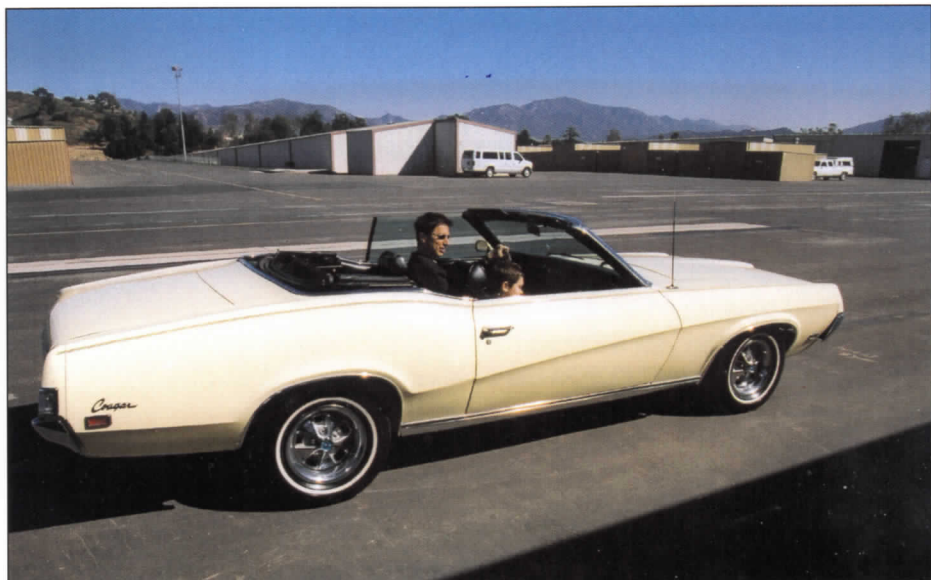
So, Romano, who readily concedes that he's "not a car guy," turned to another "brother," Brad Garrett, who plays his lone sibling, Robert, on the television show. "He's a bit of a collector of cars," Romano says of Garrett. "So, I went to him first, and we started looking around and... he came across [a] Web site on the Internet" dedicated to Cougars.

That site was the online home of West Coast Classic Cougar, a Salem,

Ore., Cougar parts and car business operated by CCOA member Don Rush. Rush remembers, now with humor, the first contact he received about Romano's interest in finding a '69 convertible Cat. His role in the search almost ended before it started, Rush says.

Romano's assistant made the initial contact, Rush recalls. "She's got a high voice, she talks fast—it sounded like direct marketing. So I thought, 'Here it is, they're trying to sell me something.' I've got a line of customers waiting and I'm giving her the cold shoulder, trying to get off the phone as fast as possible." Rush and Romano did eventually hook up, despite the confusion of that first call, and Romano asked Rush to find a solid, restored '69 convertible for sale.

It took a bit of effort for Romano and Rush to get on the same page regarding the search, Rush remembers. "They said, 'Here's a blank check. Just buy it like you're buying it for yourself.' But I said, 'No, you don't want that,'" Rush says, explaining that his tastes lean toward a big block Cougar with all the trimmings. Romano, he says, wanted a basic convertible, nothing flashy. "He wanted something 100 percent stock, nothing goofy, no stripes, spoilers," Rush says.



Actor Ray Romano and son, Matthew, take a spin in Romano's recently acquired '69 convertible. Romano, who found the car through CCOA member Don Rush, has wanted a '69 Cat ever since his brother owned one in the mid-1970s.

Rush also had trouble adjusting to the fact that he had an open checkbook, and he initially placed too high a priority on finding the least expensive car for Romano. "He almost had to shake me," Rush says of Romano. "He said, 'Don, I make good money—that's not necessary.' So, he finally got it through my thick skull that price was not an issue."

As Rush's search continued, he got a call from a Cougar enthusiast who had seen a want ad by Rush and knew of a good candidate car that had been on display recently at an Arizona Cougar Club show. The yellow ragtop was owned by Dave Finatri, a Surprise, Ariz., resident who was selling off his stable of Cougars (including a '68 Finatri had owned since it was new). The '69 was perfect for Romano: a fully restored beauty that matched nearly perfectly the car Romano's brother owned years before.



Actor Ray Romano

"I had bought the car sight unseen from somebody in Phoenix back in 1990, '91," Finatri says. "I found the car through somebody in the [CCOA]. It was in great condition, an Arizona car all the way. At the time, I owned an auto repair and brake shop in Illinois, so I sent two of my men down with a trailer and hauled it back and restored it in Illinois."

Finatri gave the car to his wife as a wedding present in 1996 after the couple had moved to Arizona, where it received minimal show time before the Finatris decided to leave the classic car hobby. "It was the last of five I restored, so we really didn't show it that much," Finatri says. He says it took some convincing to get his wife to part with her 351-powered wedding gift. "That was tough," he says, "but we kept running out of garage space. You know when you let cars sit too long—the gas varnishes, you have to rebuild carburetors. As it turned out, we had reached that stage in life... where we were just showed-out. We were done."

So, Finatri began selling his Cougars and was open to offers when Rush approached him about the '69 convertible for an unidentified buyer. After one glitch—a competing offer that Rush had to top by \$2,000 to win the car for Romano—the deal was completed. Only afterward did Finatri find out that his car had gone to a celebrity. And even then, the recognition wasn't immediate, he says.

"I had seen the show, but the name didn't click at first," he says. "I mentioned it to my wife, and she said, 'You're kidding!' We've really become avid fans of the show now."

The car, an XR-7 with just more than 106,000 miles at the time of sale, is loaded. The black top, black leather interior car, powered by a rebuilt two-barrel Windsor engine, has power steering, a Tilt-Away column, power disc brakes, air conditioning and console, among other features.

"What I like about the Cougar, it has a modern look, even though it's a classic car," Romano says. "And it's a big car, but it's a small car at the same time. It has a cozy feel to it, but it's also a pretty solid car. When I was looking for the Cougar, he [Rush] was tossing around ideas, and he said, 'What about going to the Mustang?' But it's not the same. I like the Cougars much better."

Romano says it's been tough finding time to get behind the wheel of his new weekend cruiser. He didn't drive it before buying it, and his mechanic (a master mechanic who also provides special effects for Romano's show) had the car for about three weeks immediately after the purchase to perform minor valve and front-end work. "Then I got it back and now, we just moved houses, so I'm in the middle of all that," he says. "So, I didn't get much chance to drive it. I took the kids around once or twice and I took it to work once, and that's about it."

Not being much of a "car guy," Romano says it's unlikely he'll display the car at shows. And as for the television show, there's not much chance you'll see the car there, either. "The show's 6 years old now, and in year one, we did the car episode, where the father's selling the car that I grew up in and I have all these memories of my girlfriends in it," he says.

For now, at least, it's just weekend rides for Romano's '69 convertible, he says.

"Yeah, I'm just going to have fun driving to the ballgame with my kids, whatever," the father of four says. "When we were looking, there was one car Don found and he said, 'It's the best Cougar in the world today.' But he said, 'Ray, it's almost like you don't even want to drive that one.' So, I told him no, I'm looking for one that's mint condition, but I'm going to drive it. So, this was a nice compromise."

