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AUTO EGO

## Ask Me About My Flux Capacitor

By RICHARD S. CHANG

THINGS happen when you own a DeLorean, the sports car turned ultimate time machine in the “Back to the Future” films.

The car was larger than life. Its creator, John Z. DeLorean, was a self-promoting swinger in tailored suits who dated models and Hollywood starlets. He was caught in an [F.B.I.](#) sting with 55 pounds of cocaine, which the authorities said he planned to sell to prevent the collapse of his company. Though he was acquitted, the trial further cemented his name and his car as irresistible emblems of pop culture.

**\*Lauren J. Reilly\***

**Manhattan**

Occupation: Advertising producer

Car: 1981 DeLorean DMC-12

Date Acquired: 2004

“Having a DeLorean is like 5 percent being a rock star,” said Lauren J. Reilly, a bubbly 31-year-old producer at the Deutsch advertising agency who owns a 1981 DeLorean DMC-12 — the only model DeLorean built (and for just two years).

It was an unseasonably warm winter Sunday when Ms. Reilly drove her DeLorean in a several-block radius around Midtown Manhattan, where she lives and keeps her car. Tourists were out in full force, convening at every street corner with directionless awe. In front of [Radio City Music Hall](#), a tall man in a black raincoat stared at the DeLorean, eyes squinting, as he strode up the block. In Times Square, a cluster of red-faced teenagers pointed, bursting into a fit of giggles.

Ms. Reilly expressed some disappointment. Usually, she said, passers-by are hard-charging the car with their cameras set on rapid fire. But not today; she settled for points and stares.

“One time I was down in Philly, and behind me I hear this megaphone from the cops,” she said. “They’re like, ‘Pull over!’ ”

Before Ms. Reilly could comprehend her violation, an officer delivered one of the film’s famous quotes over the police car’s loudspeaker: “One point twenty-one gigawatts!” (She also gets a lot of “88 miles per hour!”) The officers watched her car while she and a friend got cheesesteaks.

“Phenomenal,” she said, beaming at the recollection.

Though known as an exotic car — its body was sheathed in unpainted stainless steel, not unlike a kitchen sink — the DeLorean was a failure as a performance car. Its engine, a 2.8-liter V-6 developed jointly by Peugeot, Renault and Volvo (known as the PRV6) was too flaccid to rival any Ferrari. It went from zero to 60 miles an hour in 8.8 seconds, slower than a Mazda RX-7 at the time. “Back to the Future” definitely helped the car rise above its merits.

Ms. Reilly, a design enthusiast, began the hunt for her DeLorean six years ago — as a birthday present to herself. She spent a year doing research, learning all she could about the DeLorean's characteristics and quirks. She spent another year looking for the right car — black interior, gas flap (in later models, access to the tank was under the hood), the optional automatic transmission — before settling on one. She bought it on eBay for \$13,000 in 2004. Since then, life has been a chain of small adventures.

“The first time I drove it, it stalled out” alongside Bryant Park, she said. “Everyone there thought it was some sort of purposeful display.” She has also driven the car in the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade, rented it out for '80s parties, and taken it to her high school reunion. “Definitely cool stuff happens because of it,” she said.

Behind the wheel, Ms. Reilly was in perpetual motion. Approaching intersections, she leaned forward to look down cross streets. She slid back in the seat to pitch glances in the rearview mirror. Her sharp brown eyes shifted between focus and concern.

Driving a DeLorean seemed like a physical activity. “There's no power steering,” she said. “The pedals are tight.” She recalled, “The first time I drove it home, I thought, What have I got myself into?”

At a red light on 10th Avenue, she pleaded with the car. “Oh car, please don't stall,” she said. It didn't.

“I feel very in tune with this car,” she said. “You have to listen to it. You have to feel it. Everything can break on you.”

Once, a tire exploded while she was in the fast lane on the New Jersey Turnpike. “The rim was hitting the pavement and showering sparks were coming out,” Ms. Reilly said. “I freaked out. I thought the car was on fire because all I could see was smoke and spark. I drifted into the middle — thank God I didn't get more hurt.”

She added: “So now I don't listen to music. I pay attention. I'm always listening to see if there's an engine problem.”

Even if she wanted to listen to the stereo, there's only a cassette deck with auto reverse. “This is very futuristic for 1981,” she said.

Unlike owners who have modernized the sound system or added punch to the engine, Ms. Reilly prefers to keep her DeLorean authentic. Some owners have gone as far as converting their cars into replicas of the movie's time machine, complete with flux capacitors and Mr. Fusion home-energy reactors. “There are definitely the ‘Back to the Future’ freaks,” she said. “They're all about the movie.”

The typical demographic, however, is less intense, although Ms. Reilly said she believed there were some consistent characteristics: males, 30s, “a little geeky — they kind of love the little details.” She may not fit squarely into that box, but she does satisfy another common personality trait: she's type A.

“If you don't like talking to people or don't like the attention, then don't buy this car,” Ms. Reilly said. “Because you will be approached by people with questions and stupid jokes.”

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