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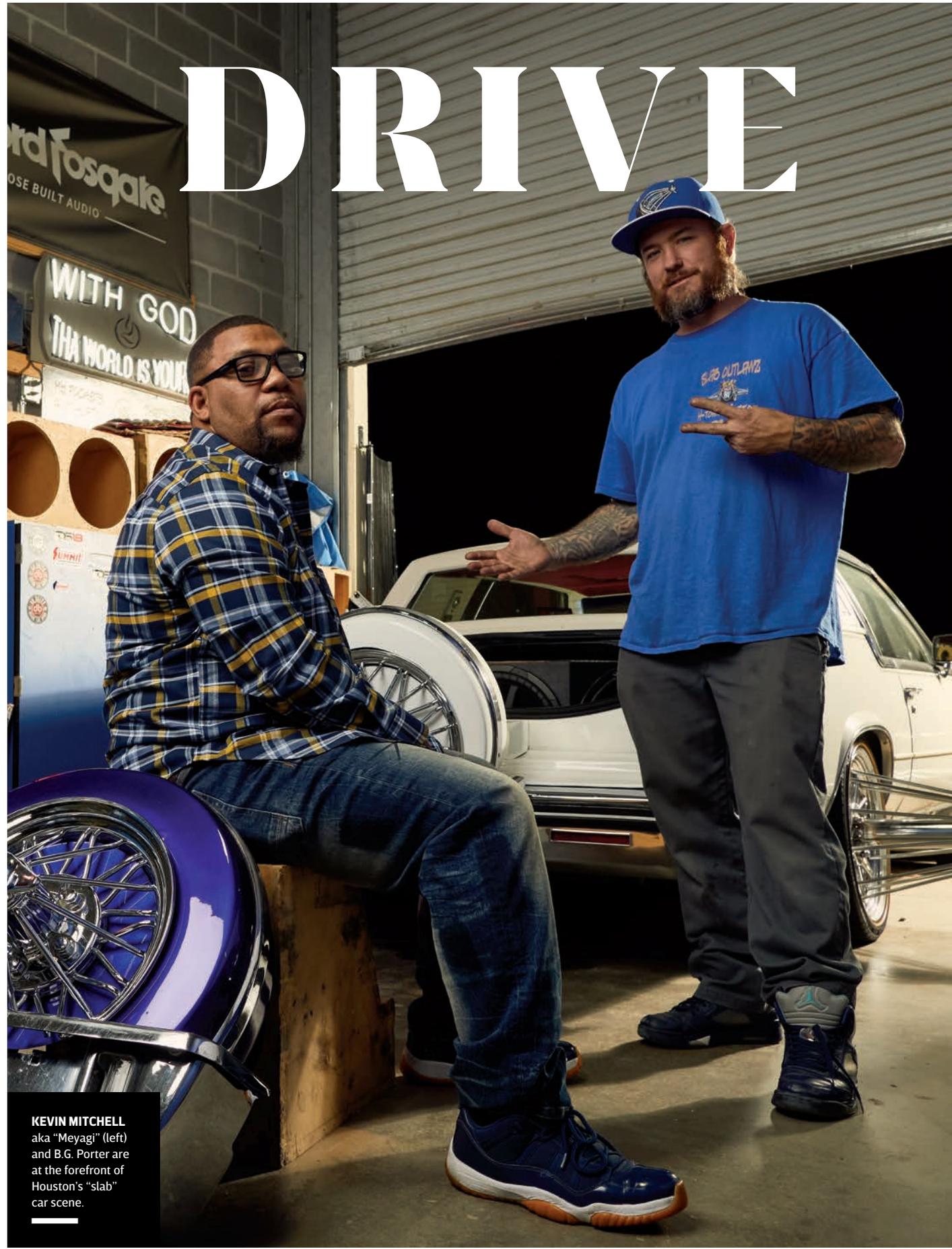


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# DRIVE

**KEVIN MITCHELL**  
aka "Meyagi" (left)  
and B.G. Porter are  
at the forefront of  
Houston's "slab"  
car scene.

Photo: Nathan Lindstrom



**HULKING AMERICAN**  
sedans are prime  
landscapes for  
creating slabs.

# Hitting the Slab

Big-bodied sedans with wild rims and other attention-grabbing accessories are more popular than ever in Houston

By Michael Hardy



If you've spent significant time on Houston roadways over the past few decades, you've probably seen one: a low-slung, candy-colored vintage sedan, like a Jolly Rancher on wheels, with its rims poking out and a spare tire mounted on the rear bumper. Even before you saw it, you may have felt the teeth-rattling bass and heard the molasses-slow rhythm of Houston hip-hop emanating from the stereo system in the trunk. If so, you were in the presence of a "slab," Houston's distinctive contribution to American car culture.

One of the foremost practitioners of this art form is Kevin Mitchell, aka "Meyagi," a chemical operator at National Oilwell Varco who lives in the Houston suburb of Pearland and has been building slabs since the early 2000s. On a Friday afternoon in October, I met Mitchell at Ricardo's Auto Upholstery in northeast Houston, where he showed me his latest creation: a 1994 Cadillac Fleetwood he has spent the past year—and about \$22,000—transforming from a broken-down, rusted-out piece of junk into the slab of his dreams. "Most people would have looked at it as a box of bolts," Mitchell said, "but I could already see the picture in my head."

After fixing up the engine, Mitchell started in on the modifications. He installed a panoramic sunroof scavenged from a Cadillac SRX, side-mirror turn signals taken off a late-model Mercedes-Benz, brake lights from a different Cadillac, and a custom-made chrome grille. Finally, he added the wheels—four for the tires, one for the external spare (also known as a continental kit), and a sixth molded horizontally into the rear dash.

He then had the car painted a bright cobalt blue. After completely gutting the Fleetwood's original interior, he installed four bucket seats covered in

cream-colored leather. All that remained was to install the hi-fi stereo system—powerful enough to require a separate battery—and the pop-trunk sign, a slogan or logo affixed like a plaque to the underside of the trunk door, visible only when the trunk is popped. Mitchell chose "Mr. All-Blue Everything."

Slab culture emerged from the working-class African American neighborhoods of southeast Houston in the early 1980s. During a historic oil bust that drove high unemployment, many young men turned to manufacturing or selling crack cocaine, according to Langston Collin Wilkins, who grew up in Houston's Hiram Clarke neighborhood and wrote about this topic for his doctoral dissertation at Indiana University on hip-hop music and Houston street culture. Although most street-level dealers lived hand to mouth, the higher-ups began amassing serious money, and they wanted to let everyone know it. "They wanted their cars to be an outward projection of their personality and their identity," Wilkins said.

Inspired by the "pimpmobiles" popularized in 1970s blaxploitation films like *Superfly* and *The Mack*, these dealers began buying big-bodied Cadillacs, Buicks, Lincolns, and Oldsmobiles, and customizing them with garish paint jobs and lavish interiors. And then they "hit the slab," a reference to the concrete slab of the street. Over time, the term was transferred to both the cars themselves ("slabs") and the act of driving them ("riding slab" or "holding slab").

In 1983, Cragar Wheels introduced a new 30-spoke rim, intended for the Cadillac Eldorado, that poked out a good 4 inches beyond the tires, like the spikes on the wheels of Roman chariots. The look immediately caught on in Houston, where these singular rims became known as "elbows" or "swangas" and catalyzed the slab form. Cragar discontinued the design after two years upon deciding they constituted a road hazard—although they remain street legal in Texas, as long as the car's total width doesn't exceed 8 feet. Because of their rarity, '83s and '84s

Photo: Nathan Lindstrom

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### Slab 101

Cadillac, Buick, Lincoln, and Oldsmobile sedans manufactured between 1970 and 2000 are ideal for slabs. But you'll occasionally see SUVs, pickup trucks, and luxury cars that have been given the treatment. Foreign cars are a no-no. Here's how to customize yours.

### Required

- Set of at least five swangas (four for the wheels and one for the continental kit)
- Battery-powered stereo system in the trunk
- Pop-trunk display
  - Chrome grille
- Candy-colored paint job

### Recommended

- Decorated trunk with chrome "buckles" and "belts"
- Headrest or flip-down video screens
- Side-mirror turn signals
- Sixth swanga molded into the rear dash

The **Houston Slab Holiday Car Show** at Wonder Brewery—the most popular event of its kind—takes place every June.



**MITCHELL TINKERS** with a slab at Porter's Slab Outlawz body shop in northeast Houston.

Houston. "People would kill for them."

That all changed in 2005 when Texan Wire Wheels began selling Cragar replicas for a fraction of the cost of the originals. Suddenly, anyone with a few thousand dollars could get their hands on the rims. Houstonians from all walks of life began building their own slabs and joining slab lines—social clubs composed of people who drive cars of the same color. "Now that the wheels are readily available, you've got corporate people buying them for their cars," Porter said. "It's anyone and everyone."

**Thanks largely to the popularity of** Houston hip-hop, slabs have gone national. Houston rappers have name-checked slabs since the early '90s, when DJ Screw pioneered the city's slowed-down, bass-heavy, "chopped-and-screwed" style of hip-hop. In the early '00s, hit singles like Mike Jones' "Still Tippin'," Paul Wall's "Sittin' Sidewayz," and Chamillionaire's "Ridin' Dirty" introduced the country to swangas, pop trunks, and other slab slang. Mitchell has met slab owners from Florida, Kansas, and New York. Even West Coast rappers, known for their lowriders that sit close to the ground and often have hydraulics that make them bounce but have none of slabs' qualifying features, have caught the bug—Mitchell helped design the interior for a slab Snoop Dogg purchased.

"Slab is Houston culture," said Houston

rapper Slim Thug, who built his first slab, a Buick Riviera, when he was 17. "Growing up here, when you saw a cool guy in your neighborhood, he was gonna have a slab. It was clean, and it was something you looked forward to having as you got older."

Slab culture has established a national foothold, but many Houston residents remain antipathetic due to its historical association with the criminal underworld. In 2013, Wilkins saw an opportunity to change that. He worked with the Houston Museum of African American Culture (HMAAC) and the city-funded Houston Arts Alliance to organize the Houston Slab Parade and Family Festival, a 50-car parade through Houston's South Park neighborhood, with a concert, food trucks, and children's activities. The one-off event attracted about 4,500 people and was covered widely in the local press. Beyoncé later incorporated footage of the parade into her music video for "No Angel."

"If you're from the Houston Black community, slab is something you're really proud of," HMAAC CEO John Guess Jr. said. "So how come this is celebrated in other parts of the country, but in Houston it's seen as something negative? I thought it was important we celebrate that culture."

For all its newfound popularity, slab culture still has high barriers to entry. You can't walk into a dealership and order a slab—it's either DIY or find someone who knows what they're doing. You'll have to rely on the far-flung and relatively

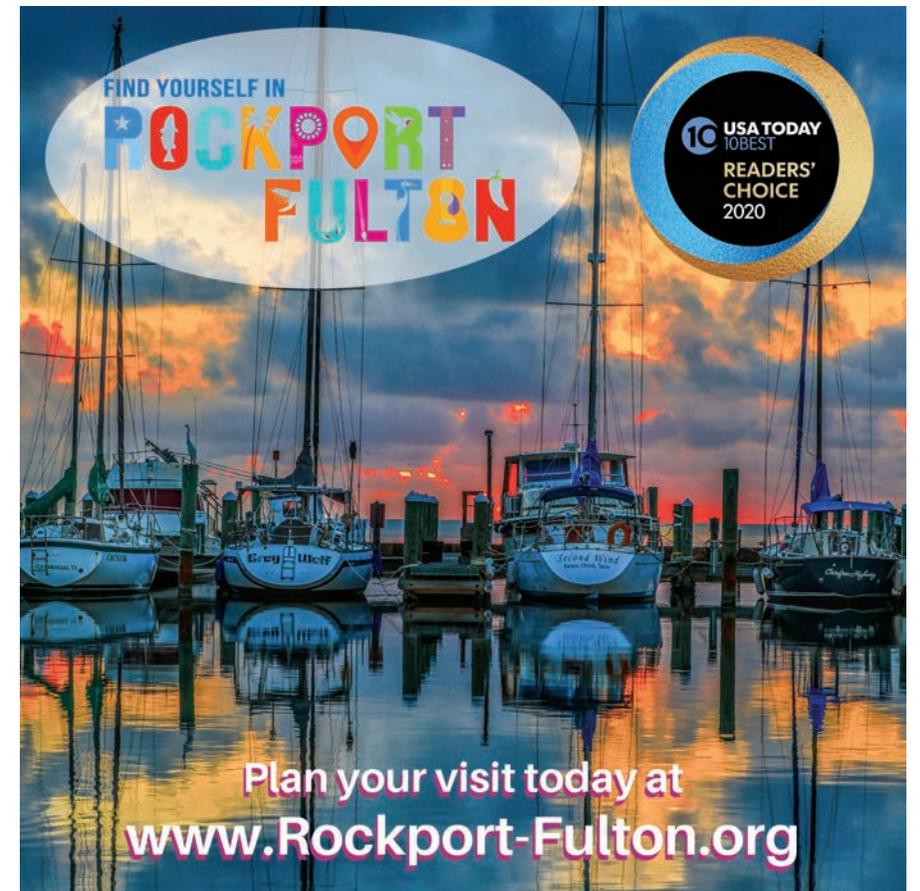
**"If you're from the Houston Black community, slab is something you're really proud of."**

clandestine network of small businesses that has grown up over the decades to service the scene: body shops, paint shops, wheel dealers, grille manufacturers, pop-trunk sign makers, and so on. When Chad Cartwright, an overseas contractor for Halliburton and KBR, first got into slab culture in the early '00s, he had a hard time connecting with other enthusiasts.

"At that time, no one in the city was doing much for slab culture," Cartwright recalled. "Lowriders had their own magazine, their own shows. I wanted to do something for our culture so it would be taken seriously." In 2003 Cartwright launched rollin84z.com, a website devoted to slabs, followed by *Slab Ridaz* magazine in 2009. With the help of Mitchell, Porter, and others, he also started organizing slab parades and shows. Today, there are several annual slab events in Houston, and on most weekends you can find gatherings at MacGregor Park in Third Ward.

As long as there have been cars, there have been car customizers. Think of the Southern California hot-rod enthusiasts who "chopped and channeled" Detroit muscle cars to make them look more aerodynamic, as Tom Wolfe wrote about in his famous 1963 *Esquire* magazine story "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby." Just like slabs, hot rods were originally associated with an illicit activity—drag racing—and attracted unwanted attention from the police. But both subcultures can also be viewed as part of the long American tradition of turning automobiles into art.

"It's like a canvas," Mitchell said, gazing lovingly at his soon-to-be-completed Cadillac Fleetwood. "You can paint whatever you want; you can put it together how you want. It's your masterpiece." 🎨



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# Let's Cross That Bridge

Thousands of historic bridges throughout Texas span rivers, tides, and time

By Dale Weisman

55,009

Number of Texas bridges built for vehicular traffic

265

Height, in feet, of the Pecos High Bridge, a rail viaduct, over the Pecos River

28

Number of international bridges and crossings along the Texas-Mexico border



BLUFF DALE CABLE-STAYED BRIDGE

**Given its vast size**, 14 major rivers, meandering coastline, burgeoning cities, and 80,000 miles of state-maintained roads, it's no surprise Texas has more vehicle bridges than any other state. Serving as the connective tissue of roads and railways, bridges span gorges, rivers, streams, floodplains, wetlands, harbors, and ship channels. Some Texas bridges built over the past two centuries have aged gracefully into enduring masterpieces, while others have deteriorated.

"Every bridge tells a story," says Kitty Henderson, executive director of the Historic Bridge Foundation. "In many cases, a bridge is important because it speaks to the development of a community, the materials available, engineering best practices, architectural styles, and prevailing economic conditions during the time of construction."

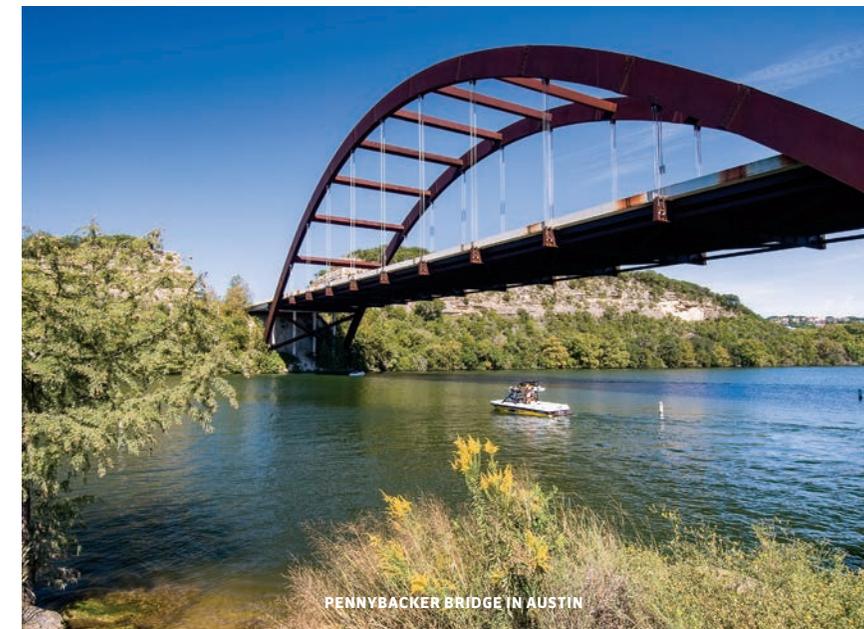
An estimated 50% of historic bridges have been lost nationwide in the last 25 to 30 years, Henderson says. Many decades-old metal truss bridges have decayed beyond repair. Others are replaced when they no longer meet modern requirements for load capacity, width, and height. "When we lose a bridge, we lose part of our past," Henderson says. But scores of aging bridges are preserved and designated as historic landmarks or converted for pedestrian use. Cherished spans also anchor small-town heritage tourism, attracting history buffs who love the timeless allure of old bridges and the colorful stories they tell.



WACO SUSPENSION BRIDGE

## Abridged

After years of service, some venerable bridges have been rehabilitated or repurposed when no longer safe for vehicular traffic. Flanked by two parks, the monumental **Waco Suspension Bridge**—the first span over the Brazos River and the earliest permanent bridge in Texas—exemplifies this adaptive reuse trend. Many metal truss spans, like the 1938 **Montopolis Bridge** over the Colorado River in Austin, enjoy second lives in parks as pedestrian bridges linking hike-and-bike trails.



PENNYBACKER BRIDGE IN AUSTIN

## Water Under the Bridge

Texas bridges are popular gathering spots where people linger to admire scenic vistas or the intrinsic beauty of the bridge's architecture. Some bear the weight of history and folklore. Here are a few must-see spans.

A river city of bridges, Austin is home to the 1910 **Ann W. Richards Congress Avenue Bridge** famed for its summer bat flight spectacle, the **Pennybacker Bridge** above the azure water of Lake Austin, and the **Pfluger Pedestrian Bridge** over Lady Bird Lake, a downtown hangout where strollers and cyclists pause to savor views of the river and cityscape.

Ghost busters and thrill-seekers frequent haunted bridges including San Angelo's **Lone Wolf Bridge**, Denton's **Old Alton Bridge** (aka Goatman's Bridge), and south San Antonio's **Donkey Lady Bridge**. The last is home to a local variant of the legend of La Llorona, a weeping ghost who is said to roam near bodies of water mourning her children.

A **metal truss bridge** over the Red River linking Denison with Durant, Oklahoma, sparked a political battle between the neighboring states in 1931. The "Red River Bridge War" pitted the Oklahoma National Guard against the Texas Rangers during a nine-day standoff. See a piece of the bridge at Colbert City Park in Oklahoma.

## Engineering Marvels

**Masonry arch bridges** are among the earliest built in Texas, recalling ancient Roman designs. Arch bridges surged in popularity during the Works Projects Administration's bridge-building era following the Great Depression.

**Suspension bridges** use vertical hangers to carry the load of the deck, or bridge surface. The 1870 Waco Suspension Bridge influenced Texas-bred designs including the 1928 Roma-Ciudad Miguel Alemán International Bridge, the last suspension bridge remaining on the Rio Grande.

**Cable-stayed bridges** support decks with a fan-like spread of cables attached to towers. The 1890 Bluff Dale Bridge on the Paluxy River is the oldest bridge of this type in Texas.

**Metal truss bridges**, pioneered by the rail industry, were the go-to design from 1880 to 1930, with thousands constructed initially of wrought iron and then steel. The 1959 Corpus Christi Harbor Bridge, slated for demolition and replacement, is one of the state's last large-scale truss spans.

**Pre-stressed concrete beams** gained popularity in Texas by the 1950s, combining durability, strength, and economy for bridges, causeways, highway overpasses, and multilevel flyovers.



# The Need for Speed

Watch muscle cars flex at the International Presidio Drag Strip

By J.D. Garcia

**A**long the banks of the Rio Grande lies Presidio, an unassuming, sleepy border town inhabited by cattle ranchers and Border Patrol agents. Unknown to many, it's also home to men and women who love to tinker under the hoods of classic cars and race them on the desolate rural highways and in the recently reconstructed racetrack just outside of town.

"You wouldn't think that there are fast and powerful cars here, but we have them," says Robert Romero, a local schoolteacher who moonlights as president of Presidio Drag Racing and races a 1962 Chevy Nova.

The International Presidio Drag Strip had been a feature of the city for decades, often hosting outdoor festivals. But by 2018, the track had fallen into disrepair after nearly a decade of inactivity. That's when Romero and Vice President Alex Jimenez took over.

Their club raised \$15,000 from the city, along with in-kind contributions from Odessa-based construction companies, to turn the old 55-foot drag strip into a 310-foot straightaway. The surface is thicker in depth than normal, with 6 inches of concrete making up the road, as opposed to the standard 4 inches. This helps preserve the track as muscle cars, classic cars, and diesel trucks outfitted with big-block engines rip down the line—the fastest ever finishing at 5.9 seconds. The International Presidio Drag Strip averages an event every two months, attracting racers from West Texas and northern Mexico.

"There's not much to do here in Presidio, especially during the pandemic," Romero says. "For us, it's two hours to go to a Walmart, it's an hour and a half to go to a movie. The track gives us something to do. We can come out here and drink some beers, eat some barbecue, and watch some fast cars. You can hear the engines roar, smell the rubber burn, and feel the rumble of the track." *For more information, visit [facebook.com/presidiodracing](https://facebook.com/presidiodracing).*