

FRIENDS OF DOROTHY

***Ernie Nagamatsu** offers an enlightening US perspective
on the birth, death and surprising California afterlife of
the Swallow Doretti while exercising his own example*

Photography **Evan Klein**





Clockwise, from above
Front echoes 166 Barchetta; the glamorous Dorothy Deen and actor Harry Morgan with TR3 California ; Ernie Nagamatsu at the wheel.



STEVE GIVEN

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hat was the Swallow Doretti? The key players were sports car fan Dorothy Deen – so surnamed after a shortlived marriage to L Howard Deen – and her father, Arthur Andersen. Arthur was an engineer who re-engineered the ‘Whizzer’ engines used on bicycles on which Dorothy took long treks in LA. He also manufactured small model aircraft engines that Dorothy advertised in modelling magazines, as well as *Popular Mechanics*.

Arthur also had a steel business, the Andersen-Carlson Company, which made thin-walled tubing for electrical conduits. He sold out to the Rome Cable Company located in Torrance, California, but stayed on as a manager. Arthur’s company did business with the Abingdon, UK conglomerate TI (Tube Investments) that had been founded in 1919 and in 1946 included the Swallow Sidecar and Swallow Coach-Building Company, which founder William Lyons had sold to TI when he started SS/Jaguar shortly before the departure of co-founder William Walmsley.

With Swallow floundering in the early 1950s, the TI management decided to reinject it with glamour by building a sports car and put Eric Sanders in charge. In 1952 Sanders travelled to California to meet with Arthur Andersen of the Rome Cable Company, who had streamlined the manufacture of the tubing that would be used in his cars. As much as it was a business meeting, this was also a meeting of minds between two ardent sports cars fans and, at the end of the year, Arthur was invited to the Swallow Coachbuilding Company to discuss the sales and marketing of a new sports car for America. He met with Sir John Black and ex-Bristol aircraft engineer Frank Rainbow, plotting the take-over of the hungry West Coast market with a new design that had to be ready for launch at the 1954 London Motor Show.

The team had an open brief for the design, but to reduce costs and time – only nine months to have a running, rolling prototype – they used the gearbox, rear axle and front suspension from the Triumph TR2. The chassis was of rigid Reynolds 531 manganese-molybdenum, medium-carbon steel tubing in a ‘box’ ladder design. With a wheelbase of 95in and track of 48in at the front and 45in at the rear, it was both longer and wider than a TR2’s, which left plenty of room for the engine to be set further back for an improved 52:48 weight distribution.

Like the AC Ace, the body design was clearly influenced by the 1949 Ferrari 166 MM Touring Barchetta and, in spite of being fashioned in expensive aluminium by Birmingham-based Panelcraft rather than Swallow, the prototype Doretti weighed 56lb more than the TR2. Its engine was a stock TR2 90bhp overhead-valve four-cylinder fed by twin SU carburettors, with matching Triumph four-speed gearbox and optional Laycock de Normanville overdrive. There were drum brakes behind fragile 15in four-bolt wheels that were usually uprated to wires for racing, and the live rear axle was located by semi-elliptic leaf springs.

Performance-wise it was good for 100mph, slightly blunted by those extra few pounds. That was offset by a finely crafted leather interior, which relocated the instrument binnacle to the centre, potentially to minimise changes between right- and left-hand drive. It put the Jaeger rev-counter in front of the passenger.

In March 1953, with New York’s Fergus Motors signed up for the East Coast and Southeastern Motors for the south, Arthur Andersen was appointed distributor for both Triumph and the Swallow Doretti for the entire West of Mississippi region. But how? As it happens, Paul Bernhardt, one of Arthur’s machinists at the Rome Cable Company, had started designing and manufacturing custom sports car accessories with Dorothy Deen in the early 1950s under the banner of Cal Specialties in Gardena, California. Its range included ‘wind wings’, sun-visors, aluminium valve covers and luggage racks, as well as MG and Jaguar hardtops. Cal Specialties was hastily reorganised into two corporations: Cal Sales and Cal Services.

The Durstine Agency was then hired by Standard Triumph to promote sales, featuring Dorothy Deen as the first female sports car dealer. In July 1954 a Silverstone Press event featured a six-lap race for journalists between four new Dorettis, but the truth was that, compared with contemporary sports cars such as Morgans, Austin-Healeys and the TR2 itself, performance was somewhat lacklustre. So there may have been no winning on Sunday to sell on Monday, but there was an extensive marketing campaign and the photogenic blonde bombshell Dorothy was its star.

Already she had staged a special North American debut for the yet-to-be-named Swallow sports car in the Embassy Room at the stylish Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles in January 1954. That press launch included two of the new cars and a complete ‘show’ chassis, plus five TR2s, a TR chassis and two Standard saloons. It was at this point that Arthur decided the new product should have an exotic Italian-sounding name, and ‘Italianised’ his daughter’s name to present the Doretti. As Dorothy said: ‘I was flattered that a sports car would be named after me.’

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Swallow took on the Doretti trademark and badge design and began production, with most of the early cars destined for the USA. Positive reviews meant hopes were high, but the \$3200 price was high, too, especially against \$2600 for the faster, lighter TR2. Dorothy's pleas to better adapt the car to US tastes fell on deaf ears and sales floundered.

As a result, Dorothy Deen closed the Cal Sales company and production ground to a halt. Some speculated that its ultimate parent company, TI, had been forced to kill off the Doretti because it supplied bumpers and door-locks to Jaguar, but it's unlikely anyone outside of those most invested in it ever saw the Doretti as competition for XKs.

Far more likely is that the notoriously mercurial Standard Triumph Car Company chairman Sir John Black, so instrumental in establishing the whole thing and giving the gig to Arthur Andersen, simply turned against it after being involved in a bad accident in a Swallow Doretti with test driver and competitions boss Ken Richardson. The pair were entering the main works gate at the same time as a large lorry and Sir John was badly injured in the crash. It's been suggested that the strength of the Reynolds 531 chassis saved his life, but the incident resulted in the total loss of support for the Doretti from its the key enabler.

When the plug was pulled in February 1955 just 276 Doretti cars had been built over a ten-month period. Three prototypes for a coupé version called the Sabre were also designed, but never went into production. A further 12 Dorettis were subsequently built in kit form at Monks Garage in Solihull.

And that was officially the end of the Swallow Doretti story, but on the contrary, for me, as the owner and racer of Max Balchowsky's legendary racer Old Yeller II, that is really where it starts to get interesting...

By the time of the Swallow Doretti's emergence, and its demise, race car builder and racer Balchowsky was already well-known through multiple appearances in hot rod and sports car magazines, making a name for himself as the go-to fabricator for mods and difficult repairs. *Hot Rod* magazine ran 'Haulin' Healey', a comprehensive guide to the modifications and adaptations required to fit an Austin-Healey with a Balchowsky-built Chevy engine. That article really put Max and his multi-talented 'spanner lady' wife Ina on the map. Ina was highly skilled in welding, tuning carbs and changing 'rear end' gears; reputedly she could repair anything brought to Hollywood Motors.



Clockwise, from opposite top

From behind, it could be a '50s Brit sportster;
central-binnacle interior was a step up from
the TR2; goes well enough on modest power;
engine was stock Triumph four-pot.



Max and Ina turned their attention to the Doretti. Max used his contacts at Borrani in Italy to source racing wheels to replace the fragile factory items. Then Max bought and modified six black Dorettis, fitting four with Buick engines, one with a Chevrolet and another a Cadillac. He picked the Swallow Doretti for its strength, saying: 'It was the only car strong enough for a 250-pound man to sit on it and not damage it... the rest of the car is strong,' Balchowsky noted that the Chevy-engined Doretti weighed only 40lb more than stock and yet provided almost 300bhp against 90bhp.

His second Doretti was Dorothy Deen's personal 'pre-production' demonstrator. Modifications included a Jaguar four-speed 'box, custom four-tank radiator and a Salisbury diff. Jaguar 12in drum brakes were used at the front, with special Max-drilled backing plates, and Lincoln drums at the rear. To solve the Doretti's fish-tailing issue, Max worked out that the Triumph A-arms caused steering toe-in, so he replaced them with MG front suspension components.

Having found that torque delivery was too flat with the Jaguar gearbox – and four speeds were unnecessary! – he put in a 1937-42 Cadillac La Salle transmission plus an Inland 10in Cab diaphragm clutch with heavy-duty disc to take the Buick's massive torque. A 1951-53 Mercury rear axle was fitted, with 'Hi-Tork' limited-slip differential.

Modifications were also made to the firewall and some crossmembers, plus there were a higher bonnet bulge, new engine shroud, repositioned steering box, and the floorboards were trimmed to clear the bell-housing. Engine mounts were positioned as far back as possible to benefit weight distribution, and a 12x24in hole was cut into each wing in an effort to quell the Buick engine's infamous propensity for overheating. The radiator was bigger, too.

The Buick engine modifications included boring and stroking it to 322ci for 350bhp at 5500rpm. The heads were ported and polished and fitted with lightened valves, there were 9:1-compression pistons, rocker arms were lightened, the intake manifold modified, dual coil ignition fitted, and four Ford 97 carburetors took care of fuelling. A rare Winfield cam was employed as Max had a good relationship with the semi-reclusive Ed Winfield.

The resulting beast recorded a top-speed run of 147mph, and at the drag strip the Buick Doretti established a sports car class record with 120mph terminal speed over the ¼-mile. Max claimed that, with 350bhp and proper gearing, a top speed of 160mph would be achievable, which is terrifying when you consider that one journalist, when reviewing the Max-modified Doretti, wrote: 'The result was a 2000lb roadster, the size and rigidity of a tin of baked beans, that could hit 120mph!'

Max drove the Buick-Doretti at the Glendale Grand Central Airport Sports Car Race in November '55 and at the Paramount Ranch Road Races in March 1957. Dorettis were also entered at Palm Springs, Santa Rosa, Torrey Pines, Watkins Glen and Alabama Courtland.

Max was creating so much attention with his modified Dorettis that he was soon offering them for sale, for a turn-key \$3700. Such was the interest that he wrote letters to Midwest auto dealers to see if there was national interest in more of his powerful 'Burettis'. But, again, it was not to be.

Even so, Max had shrewdly seen the potential of a strong and lightweight tube chassis with a US engine to provide an effective power to weight ratio, though the suspension required significant design changes. Could the Buretti have helped inspire Carroll Shelby's Cobra? **End**

Above

Max Balchowsky racing his fearsome, D-type goading Buick Doretti, aka the Buretti. Plans to produce more than his original six came to nothing, though the incorrigible hot-rodder also used Cadillac and Chevrolet engines.