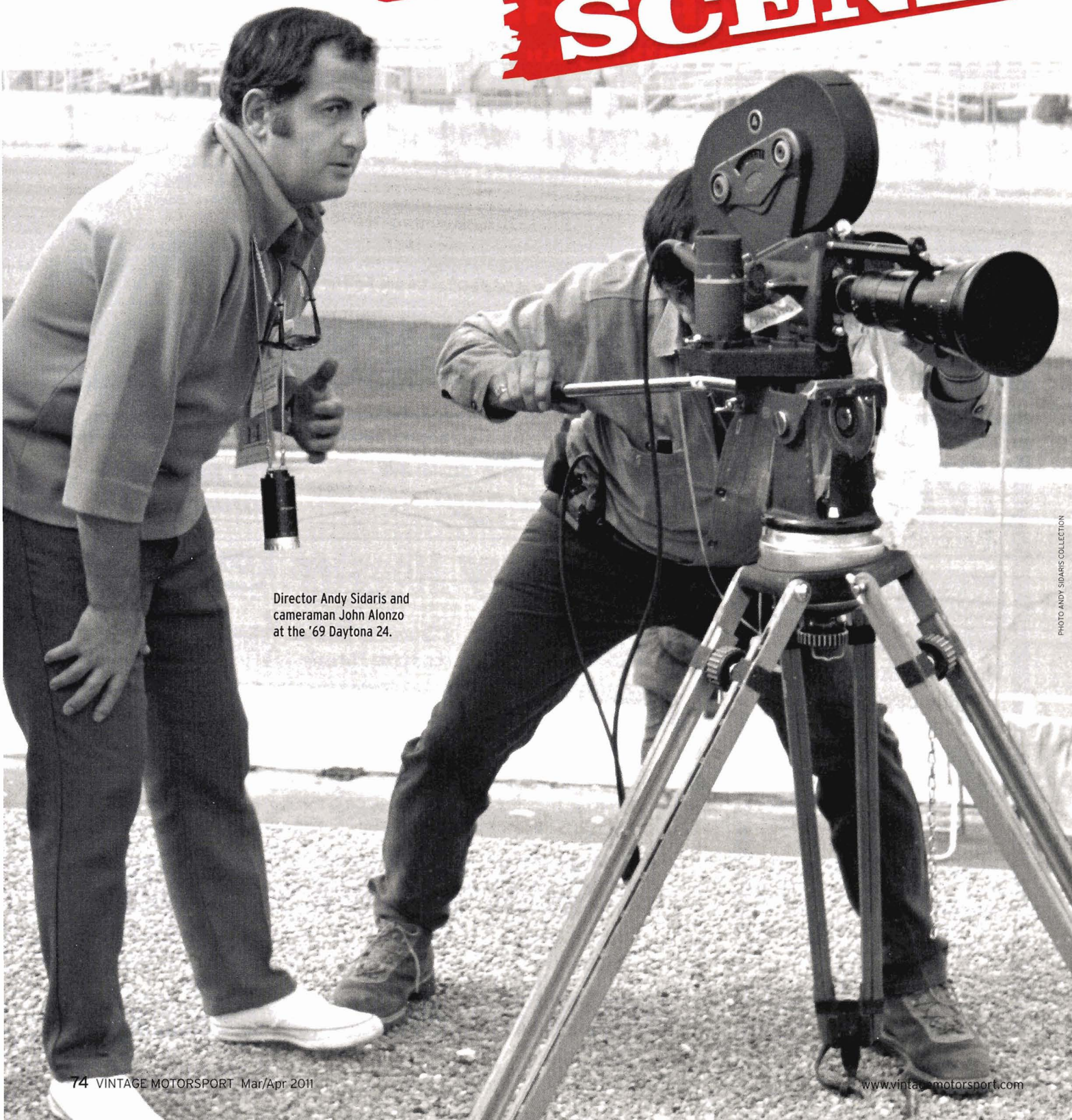


**MOVIE FLASHBACK:**

## **MAKING JAMES GARNER'S**

# **"THE RACING SCENE"**



Director Andy Sidaris and cameraman John Alonzo at the '69 Daytona 24.

PHOTO: ANDY SIDARIS COLLECTION



**IN TELLING HOW THIS CLASSIC MOTORSPORT DOCUMENTARY STARRING THE 'REAL' JAMES GARNER WAS MADE, ITS WRITER RECALLS PRODUCTION DAYS—AND NIGHTS—FROM MORE THAN 40 YEARS AGO.**

**BY WILLIAM EDGAR**

**R**acing enthusiasts everywhere have either seen, or at least heard of, the motion picture *Grand Prix*. Directed by John Frankenheimer and released in 1966, its lead character is a fictitious veteran American Formula 1 driver named Pete Aron played by then 38-year-old actor, James Garner. The spectacular race action in *Grand Prix* was alternately real or made to look so at great expense. The plot, quite another thing, was melodramatic filling difficult to excuse. In any case, the MGM blockbuster played to success worldwide. Many considered it the best racing movie ever.

Garner himself would soon have other ideas. Why not do a film on a real race team and let whatever might happen over the course of a season simply happen—without making it up? Further, why not do it with enough production value to eclipse television and go straight to theaters? It would be the kind of movie no one had ever done.

Early in 1969 then, a confluence of talent got the ball rolling on this anything-but-Hollywood screen venture. Garner, who had already formed AIR, his Corvette-based American International Racing team, had his PR guy, Don Rabbitt, set a meeting with ABC's *Wide World of Sports* director Andy Sidaris, a lit fuse noted for his real-life action coverage and love of auto racing. Sidaris, in a word, was perfect to direct Garner's documentary. Under the banner of Garner's own Cherokee Productions company in association with money-man Marty Ransohoff's Filmways, Garner, Sidaris, and line producer Barry Scholer joined ranks and hired me to work with them and write an outline for what to shoot. A year on, after countless hours of film would be edited down to the target 90 minutes, I would write Garner's narration "to picture" for telling the scriptless story as it unfolded on screen.



Goodyear tire boss Larry Truesdale (left) and Garner, Daytona 24, 1969.

PHOTO ANDY SIDARIS COLLECTION



▲ The production crew, left to right: Producer Barry Scholer, Sidaris, soundman Pierre Adidge, writer William Edgar, James Garner, director of photography Earl Rath, at Vista Point, north end Golden Gate Bridge, on way to Sears Point, Aug. 25, 1969.

PHOTO ANDY SIDARIS COLLECTION

### **Cars and Drivers**

The film's cars—a pair of blue Lola T-70 Mk III coupes and one red Surtees TS-5 Formula A open-wheeler—would be driven by Davey Jordan, Ed Leslie, Lothar Motschenbacher and Scooter Patrick. The tracks were Silverstone and Sears Point for testing the TS-5, Daytona and Sebring for the Lolas, then Lime Rock and St. Jovite for the Surtees. Completing the cast as we filmed one venue to the next would be

David Hobbs, Sam Posey, Parnelli Jones, Mario Andretti, Andrea deAdamich, Mark Donohue, Chris Amon, Roger Penske, and comic-cum-racer, Dickie Smothers.

Our "below-the-line" film crew was headed by director of photography Earl Rath, soundman Pierre Adidge, and production coordinator Beverly McAfee. Jazz artist Don Randi scored music and would compose the closing theme song. James Gross edited film while I hovered in the



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cutting room and drove him bats with story point suggestions. For the wide screen Sidaris chose Techniscope, an economical two-for-one process that had our cameras modified to expose two horizontal images per each 35mm film frame, giving a richly toned, slightly grainy, exceptionally wide look—ideal for this racing documentary meant for theater audiences.

By the first weeks of 1969, with initial outline done and starting budget in place, we began filming AIR's wet-sump, Traco Chevy-powered Lola Mk III coupes entered at the 24 Hours of Daytona—coming to the game as underdogs facing factory Porsche 908s, Ford GT40s and Roger Penske's Lolas, a year newer than ours. Garner, bearded for a feature film role in Europe, stood tall and familiar in the thick of it all at Daytona as AIR's race team owner. Rath, a former Korean War combat cameraman, had sports cinematographers John Alonzo and Peter Gowland shooting alongside him. Adidge was tops at recording spontaneous dialogue shouted over barking exhaust. The director, lovable Greek dervish that he was, seemed everywhere at once. "Andy Sidaris was after an inside peek at what people in racing actually go through," says then-team manager/technical advisor Rabbitt, today retired and playing golf in Arizona.

Rabbitt is right—that was precisely the point of our film, to see racing as it truly was, is, and essentially always will be. As Jim Garner back then told motorsport reporter Shav Glick, "It isn't a movie story in the sense that 'Grand Prix' and 'Winning' were, nor is it a documentary. It will be just like the title says, 'The Racing Scene.' We hope it will give an insight into auto racing as 'The Endless Summer' did for surfing." Big order, that one. Plus it would cost six times what Bruce Brown spent to make his famous surfing flick. Peanuts compared to today's film budgets, Garner's was \$300,000—not even very much then.

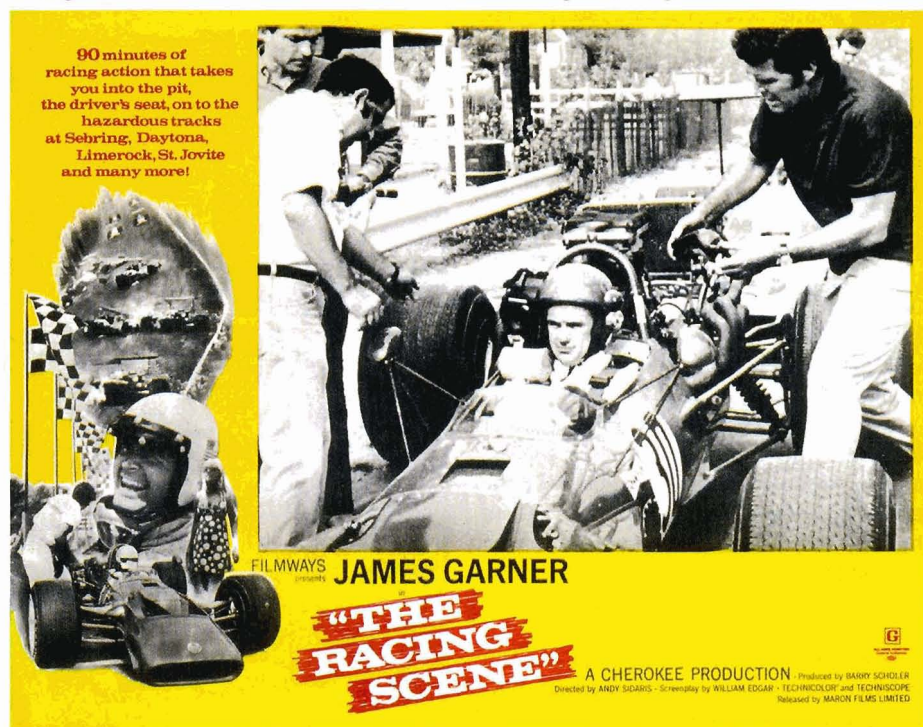
It's hard to separate motor racing and filmmaking when event and set are entwined by the excitement that gives immediacy to both. A camera jam can be as cruel as an overheating engine. It was the latter, perhaps, that kept AIR co-drivers Leslie and Motschenbacher from winning Daytona's 24 Hours, while Roger Penske's Lola coupe driven by Mark Donohue and Chuck Parsons took first. The night before the race, to shave off weight, the regular radiator in the Leslie/Motschenbacher Lola was replaced with an aluminum one that in turn caused their engine to overheat. "Early in the race," Lothar tells me today, "we

decided to change back to the regular radiator, but by then we'd lost a lot of time." They came second, with Patrick and Jordan seventh in our other Lola.

In March at Sebring, after test laps at Riverside and polishing our outline, we continued shooting with Garner and his team. Mario Andretti and Chris Amon were there in their pole-sitting factory Ferrari 312 P, and Porsche "Sebring Spyders" made an awesome start. The 12 Hours delivered Garner's T-70 Lolas hard knocks on the old Florida airport course. The engine blew in one and brakes relegated the other to sixth at the finish after closing on the winning GT40 and second-place 312 P. Our screened "dailies" looked spot-on for action and color and capturing the gut level of it all, and film editing was underway. Good times were rolling all around.

It was decided we would have three Surtees TS-5s brought over from England, but disappointment for us and John Surtees struck with fast-evaporating budget and invading temperaments, not fully aired in the film's narrative. Meanwhile, after exhausting effort married to those long shooting days helmed by Sidaris, plus weeks on end punctuated by all-nighters in the editing room on L.A.'s Sunset Strip, our film was actually coming together. But AIR was falling apart. Relations with our cars' owner John Crean had soured, and Garner resigned his position with American International Racing on July 10 to go it on his own for the rest of the film.

By then we had a 52-minute rough cut ready and were showing it to agents and potential film distributors. Our screening looked good, felt great. But we needed more



▲ The "Racing Scene" theater poster.

*The Racing Scene* wasn't all about closed-course. Garner drove 1968's Baja 1000 off-road race with Patrick and did well. For that, we used Baja's 16mm ground action and aerial footage from Bruce Brown to build our film's split-screen opening titles, inserting our own 35mm takes of Jim and Scooter as they wrestled with their Ford Bronco. And now, with the Daytona and Sebring endurance races behind us, our plan was to launch into the 1969 Formula A season with open-wheelers. Surtees or Gurney-built cars were considered, but availability and internal problems didn't sync with AIR's schedule right at first. There had to be some problem-solving, much of it behind closed doors.

racers to make it whole. A revised outline had to be written—fast. There were no computers, no laptops, and the keys of my portable Olivetti typewriter clacked away. Not making it any easier, my commitment to another film took me to Washington D.C. for 10 days, but the Olivetti went with me and pages were mailed Special Delivery from D.C. back to L.A.

We tested the Gurney Eagle Formula A car at Riverside on July 25 but problems in delivering the car's AMC engines proved insurmountable.

On August 8, at a meeting with Garner, Ransohoff and attorney Frank Wells, who would years later be president of Disney Studios, a production decision was made to



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buy one of the new Surtees open-wheel F-5000 cars and enter it in the final races of the North American Continental Formula A series. Last-minute issues with the TS-5 caused us to miss the series' ninth event at Mosport on August 24, but the very next day, after shooting a transitional "catch-up" sequence of Garner driving north over the Golden Gate Bridge and telling the camera lens what the new plans were, we were at Sears Point testing the Surtees car. Scooter did the first laps with it, to then tell Jim, "The back end wants to come around on you—it's still tricky as hell." Garner did his laps and concurred. There was plenty of work ahead to make the team's sole TS-5 competitive.

Our tempo quickened with the new car and challenge at hand. Back in L.A., we did a Filmways publicity screening on August 27, still looking for distribution, and three days later were all on a plane to Connecticut to run the Surtees open-wheeler in its first race, at Lime Rock Park on Labor Day. And labor it was, working in the heat and "hummidy"—as Garner quipped to keep us laughing—of the smothering Litchfield Hills. As miserable as the weather was, spirits and hopes were still at redline.

### Bare Bones and Loaded Down

Compared to the rest of the Formula A cars at Lime Rock, ours looked like an orphan. The TS-5 had come to us from England with no air foils, and tall tail-winged competitors with front dive planes seemed years ahead of our naked Surtees. Lime Rock, we had to accept, would be only for shakedown. For the film, we mounted cameras on the car—nothing like what we have in tiny feather-weight videocams today. These were hefty 35mm Bell & Howell Imo cameras with big lenses and ridiculously short film loads. Mounting one to the car was an engineering feat, and putting it on Scooter Patrick's helmet was asking his neck to bear the size and weight of a full metal lunch box. After conquering that, our TS-5's distributor broke in practice.

We went looking for a spare, and found one while Rath's camera and Adidge's sound rolled on our bargaining for the part, essential to put us in the race. "I'll give him whatever he wants," said Garner to Rabbitt, "even if I have to sell my bod-dee." \$2,000 later we were back on track with the new distributor. But the Lime Rock race was a bust for us. Suspension remained "walkie" and, lo and behold, Scooter's engine grenaded while local ace Sam Posey went on to win in Connecticut's heat and hummidy.

Governed by the consequences of real

racing—far from enjoying any comforts and magic attached to a Hollywood script—we were again down and out of luck, with only a week to make things better for the next race at St. Jovite in Quebec's Mont Tremblant region north of Montreal.

Garner grabbed his checkbook and flew back to California to buy a new engine for his TS-5. Meanwhile, I was splitting time between helping Gross with the film editing and trying to finish up a documentary on the U.S. Ski Team for IMG. To say times were verging on insanity would be reasonably accurate.

New engine installed, after no sleep for our mechanics Max Kelly and Bob Fischetti, the TS-5 was again running and back on track for practice at St. Jovite's superb road course. Still with no rear wing, Scooter was

4.5 sec off Posey's pace. Our fast friend David Hobbs was there, too, as was Motschenbacher and a number of other top drivers and cars, all of them quicker than us. For the film, and for the race, we needed the downforce and speed that a wing would give, and the right one was finally at hand and bolted on to our red number 30 open-wheeler.

What came next was a breathtaking ride along with Scooter Patrick as he put Garner's TS-5 through the straights and curves of St. Jovite, pedal down, honked-on and hell-bent to make up those four or five seconds needed to be competitive. If I must say so, and many more have agreed, this is one of the most thrilling, vertigo-inducing pieces of film ever shot in racing, a visual and aural indulgence that remains to this



St. Jovite, September 1969. Mounting camera on Scooter Patrick's helmet in Garner team's Surtees TS-5 Formula A/F5000 car. Left to right: Adidge, Rath, Patrick, mechanic Bob Fischetti, chief mechanic Max Kelley, Sidaris.

PHOTO ANDY SIDARIS COLLECTION



Garner, with AIR team Lola T-70 No. 8 (Lothar Motschenbacher/Ed Leslie car) after finishing 2nd at Daytona 24 Hour, 1969.

PHOTO LOUIS GALANDS



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day a classic example of in-car footage for the super-wide screen. With a sound recorder strapped on board and cameras mounted for Scooter's point-of-view, and also looking back to him at the wheel—we did it first one way, then had him pit, re-mounted the camera, and did the other angle. Sitting back and volume up, it's enough to knock your socks off.

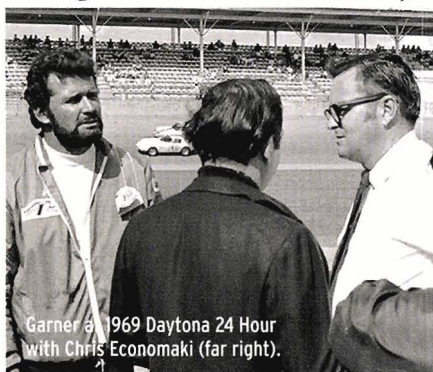
Comedian Dick Smothers was there, too, with his support race Formula B car, to take our helmet camera around on a practice lap. It was a fun ride, until Dickie's oil pressure gauge dropped to zero, easily seen on screen. Still on the throttle, he went on—but not far. "That happens to me quite a lot," Smothers quips on the film's sound track. "You can't cry over spilt motor oil." Another lighter moment was Miss Continental Race Queen, Majken Kruse, up from bed and getting ready for the big day. Sidaris shot Garner doing exactly the same—in a totally different hotel room. Cut parallel, it was kind of a charming bit with the Sidaris touch.

On Sunday morning, September 7 at St. Jovite, with our Surtees finally sorted out and running in top form, everyone on the Garner team was as excited as they had been all year. But the spectacular and fully-filmed first lap pile-up in Turn 3 that wrecked Scooter's car and seven others would take us out for good. After that, there would be no more races for *The Racing Scene*.

Sidaris had walked the track the day before and, from the bottom of the hill it traversed, Turn 3 looked especially tough. With only a couple of cameras to place trackside, this was certainly where one of them would be. The position was assigned to a stringer Earl Rath had hired on the road to shoot at this one event. His name has been lost—we called him "The Shooter from New York"—and what he did was arguably the most memorable accident scene ever filmed, catching it all from when the cars first crested the hill in front of him to his final shot of our smashed TS-5 being towed away. In between, he had the cool, once the accident unfolded, to lift his camera from its tripod and walk it into the melee, still rolling, to film the aftermath multi-car carnage in every detail while help and medics arrived and stunned drivers got to their feet or remained seated on

the ground while their broken cars steamed and smoldered.

Unique among all other racing movies, what we had "in the can" at that point was a real film on real racing, a savvy portrait of what it was to run a racing car team—the whole truth of it all, both Good and Bad. Fortunately there was no Ugly—Scooter survived the St. Jovite crash without a scratch. The only injury of note was George



Garner at 1969 Daytona 24 Hour with Chris Economaki (far right).

Wintersteen's broken leg. Throughout the production, we had played every foot of film for what might happen, not knowing until it did. As Jim Garner said, behind the wheel of his revving Baja Bronco in our opening credits, "Ask me if we think we can go down the

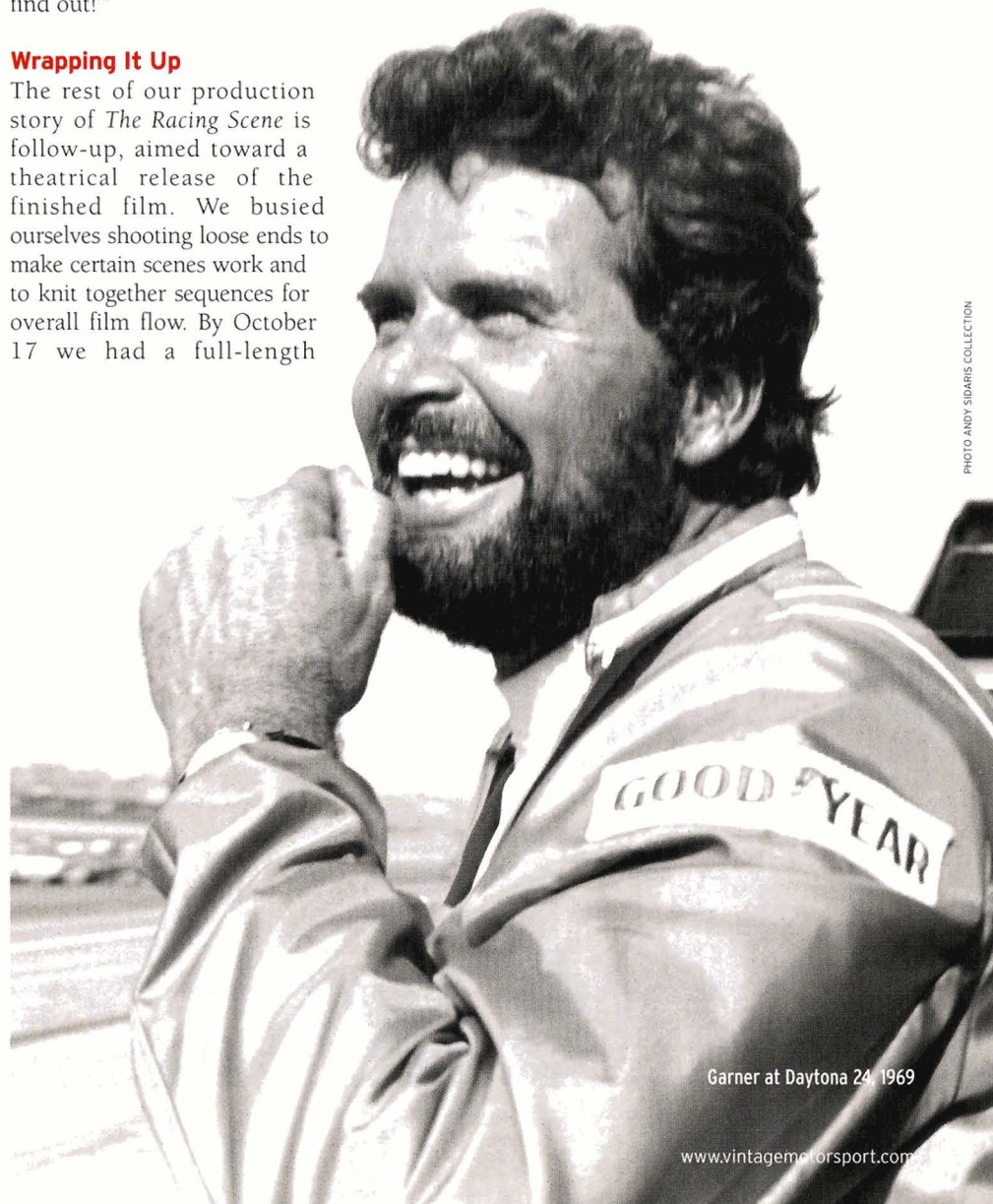
road quicker than 300 other guys, I'd probably say 'We sure as hell are gonna find out!'"

### Wrapping It Up

The rest of our production story of *The Racing Scene* is follow-up, aimed toward a theatrical release of the finished film. We busied ourselves shooting loose ends to make certain scenes work and to knit together sequences for overall film flow. By October 17 we had a full-length

screening at Goldwyn Studios in Hollywood. Fixes were due. Two weeks of changes later I began writing narration-to-picture, using a 35mm Moviola in a spare bedroom at home along with my Olivetti. It was through our year-long association, one of the best times in my life, that I really got to know Jim Garner's mind about racing and the way he naturally expressed himself. My goal was to make his words in our film reflect his emotions and what he was thinking, then write it how Jim would say it. We recorded Garner mid-December in a two-day session, laid in his narration, did a final editing polish, and dubbed *The Racing Scene* at the end of February 1970.

The release of our film is a tale of hopes and heartbreaks. In screening after screening we delighted audiences but forever struggled with the mechanics of making a proper theater distribution of our "documentary"—that deal-killing word that sounded like death to distributors. Warners turned it down, as did other studios and distributors. Garner even considered coming to the rescue



Garner at Daytona 24, 1969



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himself and follow his own course of distributing the film in the U.S. and Europe.

On April 23 we put on happy faces and had a cast and crew showing of *The Racing Scene* at Goldwyn Studios, congratulating ourselves on praise received from gathered friends and the press. Five days later, Garner and Sidaris met with Marty Ransohoff and others, where perhaps a dozen fresh plans were considered to bring the film to the movie-going public. Yet all remained more or less up in the air. Eventually, *The Racing Scene* had a short-term release in smaller theaters scattered around the U.S., a disappointment resulting in the disintegration of the never-100 percent solid relationship between Garner's Cherokee Productions and Ransohoff's Filmways.

For years after, *The Racing Scene* would go unseen, except for occasional runs on cable television, commercials inserted, and, more recently, poor-quality video clips on YouTube that come across as desecration.

In Los Angeles, on January 29, 2003, the Petersen Automotive Museum's special screening of *The Racing Scene* was a capacity sell-out, with audience of more than 450



▲ James Garner in title card, in Techniscope aspect ratio.



▲ Garner and Patrick's Bronco, into camera, Baja 1000, late '68.



▲ Garner test drives new Surtees TS-5 at Sears Point Raceway, August 25, 1969.

motorsport aficionados giving the film a standing ovation. Sidaris, cast, and crew were there for the accolades, and a resounding tribute was paid to the one most instrumental in making it all happen—James Garner.

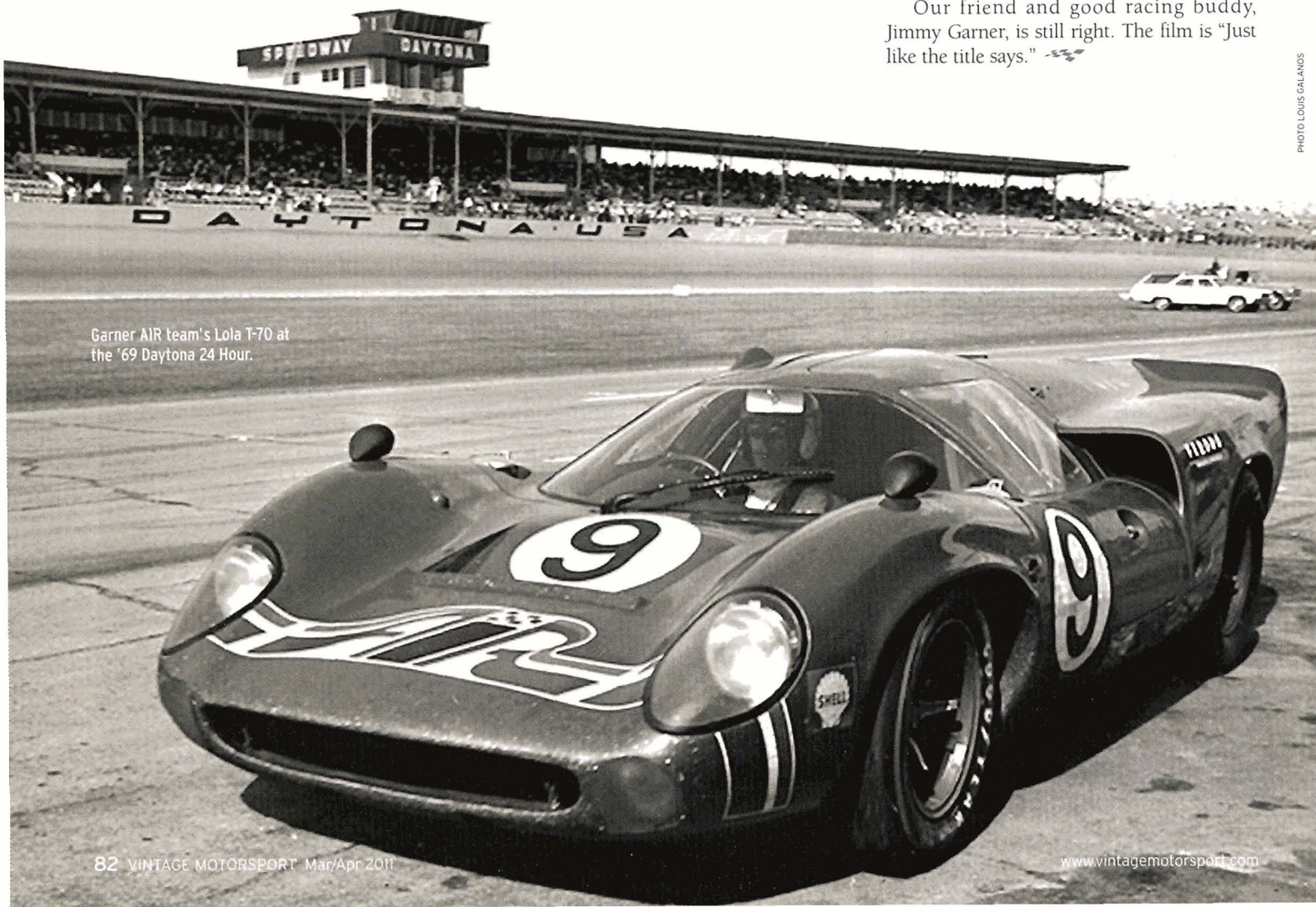
A man of great talent and enormous energy, our director Andy Sidaris lost his fight against cancer on March 7, 2007.

His unique spirit and friendship will be forever remembered by all who knew him. Quick-thinking, fast-talking, hilariously witty and always compassionate, Sidaris was a dynamo in his social and working worlds. In a final hand-written note regarding this film, Andy wrote me words that surely came from deep within—"The Racing Scene lives on!"

Will we ever see the film again in theaters on the big screen, the way it was meant to be? Or even on television, or from DVDs that might be bought and taken home to watch alone, or with a gathering of gearheads and those who know so little of what racing really is and would like to know more about taking a team to the track to do battle? Yes! That might happen yet. There are people working on it as you read.

I recently asked Scooter Patrick, championship driver and always straight-shooter, what he thinks the value of *The Racing Scene* was and is. "It should be a classic of the times," says Scoot. "It's invaluable to me as an enthusiast, and if you want to see what it was like in those times, then this is the only one you go to. There hasn't been one before or since that has that quality to it."

Our friend and good racing buddy, Jimmy Garner, is still right. The film is "Just like the title says."



Garner AIR team's Lola T-70 at the '69 Daytona 24 Hour.

PHOTO LOUIS GALANOS