

A Spark of Love



By Tracy Leshner

Zippering along in my 1974 Volkswagen "Love Bug" edition is pure joy!

If you read my "Editor's Notes," you know I grew up in a family of old car nuts. My parents pictured me driving either a Nash Metropolitan or a Volkswagen Beetle for a first car. We all have memories of our first vehicle, and some of you may still own yours too. I sure wish I did. Sniff, sniff.

On Sunday nights during the late 1980s, ABC aired Disney classics on television. My brother and I adored the *Herbie* movies. There was something about that little car that appealed to me. I became enamored with all things Volkswagen. I started to collect old ads and VW-related odds and ends. You remember those ads right? "Never." "Impossible." "How much longer can we hand you this line?" The cool kids in our neighborhood drove Beetles too. That only added fuel to the fire.

Dad got wind of a standard 1974 VW Beetle when I turned 14. The car came from a family whose three kids learned to drive stick on it. Volkswagens have very forgiving clutches. This Beetle had not been abused and was in mint condition. My parents were in the rental business, and the seller was a contractor. Dad traded some construction equipment for the VW with the understanding that I would pay him back for the car. Before I had my license, I would sit in the Beetle, inhale the intoxicating scent of VW leatherette, and pretend to drive the car. It was atlas white,



One of the few pictures of me in my first VW with my childhood traveling companion, Guido, the Labrador Retriever.





Coming home!

had black upholstery, and sporty louvers inside the back window. Even though it did not have a number 53 painted on the doors, I named the car Herbie. It must have been a nostalgia thing.

Herbie was spartan transportation. As long as we were moving along in the Florida heat, the interior was almost tolerable. Herbie may have not had air-conditioning, but he had a radio. He was freedom. Except for the occasional push start in the high school parking lot (my brother came in handy), Herbie was dependable. I drove him throughout high school and commuted to college at the University of South Florida in Tampa five days a week (50 miles round trip). I had an excellent VW mechanic, Eric, who worked out of his girlfriend's garage. He claimed that the two best years mechanically for the Volkswagens were 1967 and 1974.

After graduating from college with an education degree, I landed my first teaching job. Dad thought it was time for me to buy "a real car" since I had a real job. In hindsight, I should have responded that Herbie was a real car! Begrudgingly, I sold him to a friend (whom I have lost contact with) and bought a 1995 Ford Thunderbird. Shortly after I bought the Ford, my mother admitted they should not have insisted that I sell the Beetle.

I suffered a broken heart.

At some point, I knew that I would have another 1974 VW Beetle. Fast forward six years, I moved from Florida to Pennsylvania and married my husband Jeff. I infected him with the idea of having a Volkswagen too. In 2008 we started to look for one. Jeff came across a 1974 on eBay just across the state line in Maryland. My father's first reaction was to steer clear of it. However, he and Jeff researched and discovered that this one was different from your standard Beetle. It was a Love Bug edition, and Jeff bought it for me. Swoon. Some girls like jewelry. This one likes cars! Jeff, our then two-year-old son Augie, and I headed south with a tow dolly to bring the car home.

This Love Bug came to Maryland from California when one of the previous owners transferred to Aberdeen Proving Grounds. He sold the Volkswagen to the gentleman from whom Jeff bought it.

When I first saw this 1974 Beetle, I was taken aback. I had never seen a Beetle with blacked-out trim before. I thought that maybe an Amish teenager on Rumspringa got a hold of a black can of spray paint.



During the mid-70s, Volkswagen sales were sluggish. The company introduced several limited edition models to offset a 336-million dollar loss in 1974. One could choose from the Herringbone, Chocolate, Denim Bug, Sun Bug, Luxury, Winter, and Love Bug Editions that year.

In July of 1974, Volkswagen rolled the Love Bug off the production lines. It was a stripped-down standard Beetle with a 1600 cc engine, manual transmission, blacked-out trim, sport wheels, and choice of black leatherette or houndstooth upholstery on the seats. Since VW built this edition in July 1974, it has some 1975 features, including the steering wheel and the dash pad. Love Bugs came in two paint colors: Ravenna green and Phoenix red (both VW Thing colors). "Love Bug" plaques were mounted on the dash and front side quarter panels. We know that Volkswagen sent one of each color to dealers in the United States. At this time, there were approximately 1,400 dealers in North America.

This particular Love Bug is a true California car. The vented rear engine deck lid is unique to California. The car came equipped with a special intake manifold and carburetor to help reduce emissions. These engines ran lean.

Our original intentions were to just get "Sparky" running and scrub him up. You can see from the pictures that's not what happened. Jeff and my dad started to restore the VW with the help of our favorite body man, Tony Winington, down in Florida. Jeff brought the car down to my parents' home in Tarpon Springs. Another plus was that we knew of an excellent VW mechanic nearby in Holiday. Kenny's VW is a best-kept secret. He doesn't advertise and only picks up the phone on certain days of the week. His shop is always busy. When the engine went to Kenny, he questioned the intake manifold and carburetor. Dad and Jeff quickly decided that keeping the California intake manifold and carburetor was not an option.

Top to bottom: One of two known 1974 VW Love Bug edition ads by Volkswagen of America. A very pregnant me and our then three-year-old son Augie stand next to Sparky. The car underwent a ground-up restoration. This is the summer before the 2009 AACA Eastern Fall Meet at Hershey, Pennsylvania.

Your very own Love Bug.

At a special, low \$2499,* it's a sweetheart of a deal.



Now you can own your very own Love Bug, from Volkswagen.
The Love Bug comes in two romantic colors. Red hot red. And luscious lime green. It has lovely racing type wheels. And cute black trim.
But at only \$2499*, we can't afford to be too generous.



So if you want one, you'd better hurry. A love like this won't last forever.

The Love Bug
Limited Edition

© Volkswagen of America, 1974. *Love Bug East Coast P.O.E. Suggested Retail Price (West Coast Slightly Higher). Local Taxes and Any Other Dealer Charges. † Any Additional



The restoration of this car became therapy for my dad. At the time, my mother had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Between visiting my parents and Sparky, we made numerous trips to Florida. The car was a distraction for me, too.

Tony had prepped and painted numerous antique cars for my parents. He was highly-regarded in the area for his body and paint work. But he swore he'd never do another Volkswagen again. You would not think that a small car would be so much work. The paint prep work was a stripping nightmare. Phoenix red paint covered every surface on the car's exterior and interior.

As far as we know, only two print ads feature the Love Bug edition. On the Volkswagen website, the Samba, Jeff discovered information about the "Love Bug" plaque available for the car. He found one on eBay and mounted it on the glove box.

By late summer 2009, there was a push to have Sparky ready for the AACA Hershey Fall Meet. Come October, I prepared to show a car and push a kid out. I was 37 weeks pregnant with Jack, Augie's soon-to-be younger brother, and barely fit behind the steering wheel.

We showed the heck out of that little car for many years. Sparky earned AACA Junior, Senior, and Preservation awards. He was also nominated for an AACA National Award in 2011. Jeff and I surprised my dad at the 2012 AACA Eastern Spring Meet in Shelbyville, Tennessee, by showing Sparky there. We did not tell him we were going. My dad brought his 1972 Buick GS Stage Two to show. And we both won Grand National Awards there! It was the last car show Dad and I attended together. He passed away six months later, just two years after we lost my mother.

After I received the Grand National Award, I started to drive Sparky regularly, provided it was not raining or snowing. I can almost get a full cart of groceries in the trunk. Over the years there were regular trips to school where I used to teach. Our boys loved to ride in him on the way there. Augie rode in the car until he grew too tall. He also learned to drive a stick on the VW. Now, Augie's feet are too big for the pedals. Jack will be next in line for driving lessons.

I continue to drive Sparky any chance I have. The Phoenix red paint is so bright that it reflects off speed limit signs. It's fun driving a car that makes other people smile. (You know that feeling too when you drive your antique cars!) Plus, I feel like I am 17 years old every time I get behind the steering wheel.

A lot of love is invested in that car. I'd like to dedicate this article to my husband Jeff, my parents, and Tony Winington.

(Photos by Tracy Leshner)



Top to bottom: Dad, Tony, and Augie pose with a freshly repainted VW. Here I am getting ready to drive onto the Hershey Meet show field for the first time! Jeff, Dad, Jack, me, and Augie at Shelbyville, Tennessee. This photo is a favorite.

