

# 'Smokey & Bandit' Firebird Kit Car On View in Bloomfield

by Gerald Scott

Everybody remembers the fun 1977 movie "Smokey and the Bandit," starring Burt Reynolds, Sally Field and Jackie Gleason.

But everyone who sees the movie tends to agree that the *real* star was the black 1977 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am that Reynolds drove in the movie.

Movie folklore holds that at least four Pontiac Trans Ams were used to film the movie. The original Pontiac engine wasn't strong enough to power the car for the bridge jump sequence, however, so a Chevrolet engine was installed in the jump car.

Anyway, all of this leads us to aftermarket supplier ProjxAuto of Madison Heights, which is marketing a Zeta platform kit (formerly F-Body) to convert the look of any 2010-13 Camaro into the more recognizable black-with-gold trim "Bandit" Firebird.

In much the same way that Ford built a retro "Bullitt" Mustang to tip its hat to the memory of Steve McQueen and the 1968 Mustang he drove in the "Bullitt" movie of that era, so, too, now is ProjxAuto and its partners offering a modern version of the "Bandit" movie car Firebird.

Look for ProjxAuto's Firebird, built on a base 2011 Camaro, on display at the Radisson Hotel in Bloomfield Hills during the Woodward Dream Cruise on Saturday, Aug. 18.

Lowell Kiester of ProjxAuto discussed the kit-car recently and he was especially asked about the signature phoenix-bird rising emblem on the hood – the easiest way to tell Firebirds from Camaros back in the 1970s. This phoenix is not quite the same one you remember from 1977, however.

"It's a retro design, we had (for-

mer Ford designer) Camilo Pardo do the design for us, it's a modern version of the old bird," Kiester observed.

"Basically, this is a conversion package we're selling – replace the whole front end and rear end and convert your modern-day Camaro into a Firebird Trans Am.

"It starts at \$5,000 and then there are some options on our website that will take you up to \$7,000. It's a Chevy motor, the car is still a Chevy but as you know, Pontiac's gone. Without Pontiac, this is the next best thing. These are all OE-quality parts.

"Since we're based out of Detroit, we have actual suppliers for GM who manufacture our parts – EMI does our hood and fenders, CPS, Complete Prototype Servic-

es does our front and rear fascias, Pinnacle Products does some blow molding for us.

"We're using the power and the capabilities and the quality of the materials from the suppliers in the area, so it's not just an aftermarket kit, it's going to hold up under warranty and the products will last."

With the closing of the Pontiac brand name by GM and the products that went with it, Firebird T/A is living on largely on nostalgia, although we might point out that when country singer Randy Travis was arrested last week for both public drunkenness and being naked in public, it was done from the driver's seat of his Pontiac Firebird. (Don't expect GM to send out a press release pointing

this out, however).

Also, in the same 1970s era as the "Bandit" movie, even Bruce Springsteen once referenced the car in his later car cruise song "Cadillac Ranch":

"James Dean in that Mercury '49 / Junior Johnson runnin' through the woods of Caroline / Even Burt Reynolds in that black Trans Am / All gonna meet down at the Cadillac Ranch."

You had to be alive in the 1970s to remember how popular the "Smokey and the Bandit" movie was back then – after it had legs as a first run film in 1977, it stuck around for years as a drive-in movie staple long after its debut. One Hollywood report says that "Bandit" was the second-highest-grossing film of that year behind

only the original "Star Wars" debut.

So, back to the aftermarket car itself, it's the modern Camaro sticker price plus up to \$7,000 worth of upfit, but actually maybe a little more according to Kiester.

"By the time you paint, and installation, probably under 10 (grand), but sky's the limit – how big's your wallet?" Kiester said.

"If you had a six-cylinder car, and you wanted to just get into the basics, you could probably do it for eight (grand). It depends on what you farm out and what you do for yourself. Some Camaro owners have actually purchased this. It's all over the place. But typically it's the people who remember the Firebird."

## Stars Align With GM Global Team

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whom will report to Doug L. Parks, who has been appointed to the newly created position of vice president, Product Programs.

Parks was previously executive director and group vehicle line executive for electric cars, a position he held since March 2012. He had also earlier served as global vehicle line executive and global vehicle chief executive for electric cars, including the Chevrolet Volt.

The executive chief engineers will be totally responsible for their respective groups of vehicles from inception through production. That includes defining the requirements of GM's new vehicles to ensure they win in the marketplace as well as understanding the competitive landscape and managing costs.



"Smokey and the Bandit" Firebird kit for F-Body enthusiasts.

## Dodge Pulls Out of NASCAR

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Driver Keselowski currently is seventh in the Sprint Cup standings and has three wins in his quest to make the 12-driver Chase field for the second consecutive year. In Nationwide Series competition, Sam Hornish, Jr., is locked in a four-way battle for the season championship.

Reaction around town to the news included shock but not surprise, given NASCAR's many current challenges vis-a-vis the Dodge/SRT Motorsports budget. Dodge pulled out of the NASCAR circuit in 1977 for similar reasons.

"This is pretty huge," former crew chief Larry McReynolds, now a television analyst, told the Associated Press.

"This isn't years ago when NASCAR had several different manufacturers and if one had pulled out, it wouldn't have been so noticeable. But in 2012, we only have four, and with one less this news doesn't make the right statement about the sport. Any-

time a major sponsor of any kind, whether a manufacturer, primary team sponsor or series sponsor packs up and goes home, it doesn't look good for NASCAR."

Said local Detroit auto expert John McElroy, "Dodge has actually done the best it's done in a long time right now (on the track), but Dodge just can't spend the amount of money that Ford Motor can. You know Roger Penske, he's there to win, he's not just there to place.

"Lately, Roush hasn't been doing that good, I think Roger sees a real opportunity to step in here and have a Ford Motor Co. behind him that can spend a lot of money, a lot more than Dodge could.

"If they were to go with another team right now, it would take them years to build back up. And because they would only have one team, unlike Chevy-Ford-Toyota, which have multiple teams, Dodge would be an also-ran, probably, for years to come and I think they just said, 'We can spend this money better elsewhere.'"

## Ford Holds Nat'l. Soybean Conference

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event," Vilsack said. "What a great partnership and it's obviously bearing significant fruit, both for the company and also

for soybean producers – but also the country.

"It's an amazing opportunity for these young people, it's great to see you here. Forget about opportunities at Ford, if you want to

work for the USDA," he joked. "We have paid internships in the summer months for college students. This is an unlimited future you have before you (in the agriculture industry)."

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