A couple years back, one of my colleagues called to tell me with great enthusiasm, that he was finally going to Bonneville. Nor a floundering scribbler, he’s past 50, had a good life as a boy actor and settled into an autojournalism career that includes a few books. “John Fitch is going to drive at Bonneville”, said Tim Considine excitedly.

“Can you help me with some background?” Of course, but I wondered, “who the blazes is John Fitch?” Since Tim wrote about American sports car racing, I figured it was one of those tweed jacket and flat cap fellows.

A bit of research revealed that this fellow was no ordinary sports car guy. On his website www.racesafety.com Fitch’s biographical sketch noted: “blue-water sailor, fighter pilot, test pilot, professional racing driver, team manager, race course director, prolific inventor, highway safety expert, automaker, entrepreneur and dreamer.”

John Cooper Fitch, 87, is a descendent of the inventor of the steamboat so no surprise about his love of mechanical things. And the next time you drive by a grouping of those sand-filled plastic-barrel crash cushions in front of bridge abutments, remember them by their proper name: the Fitch Barrier which he invented and personally crashed-tested. I should have marched over to meet this fellow, but didn’t - either year. Big bozo mistake. However, filmmaker Chris Szwedo, who the racers are and Bonneville is a very ethereal soundtrack which I commented, “Very abstract and ended up from his emotions.

“It was an organic experience,” he commented, “very abstract and ended up being a very ethereal soundtrack which I spun off as a music CD and has found a listening audience on its own.”

Beyond Mach One

The supersonic Brits are back - only this time tankering for the World’s Fastest Diesel record. World Land Speed Record holders Richard Noble and Andy Green along with trusty aerodynamicist Ron Ayers are helping JCB, a construction equipment firm, attempt to win the title for company and Queen.

JCB is the world’s fifth largest manufacturer of construction equipment and has 17 plants on four continents.

Funny thing is that the boys are all “salt virgins”, having never set a salt record. Noble tried back in the 80’s but got washed away to find Black Rock Desert in Nevada and then in 1997 the trio deposited a motorsports milestone of Mach One proportions with ThrustSSC. Green has always longed to drive on the salt, the failed MG project a few years back only got him as far as rookie school (taken with yours truly), so his itch has yet to be scratched, but now is the driver of the yellow and black JCB DieselMax Streamliner scheduled to compete on a special track during the upcoming Speed-week.

“This is very much a JCB team project,” explained Noble, “I have no status or role in the program. I was approached by the JCB Chairman to help them with their thinking on a land speed record project to promote the JCB 444 engine. We came up with the 300mph program using two 444 engines and the concept was the Railton Mobil Special of 1918 using uncoupled engines and ice tank cooling. With two-stage turbocharging at over 5 manifold pressure the JCB engine units are delivering nearly 6 times the power of the basic bockhoe unit.”

Because the car performance margins are tight the project has been difficult to execute meaning that crossectional area, coefficient of drag and weight values have to be ruthlessly trimmed and this has led us into areas of new design, technology and understanding. For a conventional manufacturing company this is a very courageous undertaking - because we all know how difficult record attempts and failure can damage the manufacturer’s brand. There have been times in the program when I believed JCB
would behave like a conventional sponsor and disengage - but to their everlasting credit they have stuck with it and their support has never ever faltered."

Noble added that he also sees an emerging trend in how European motor-sports information is being delivered to the public. No longer solely dependent on indirect promotional campaigns through newspapers, magazines, radio or even television, Noble senses that the internet has empowered racing teams and their sponsors to speak directly to enthusiasts, and fans.

“Our 800 page ThrustSSC website showed the way forward and achieved 59 million page hits in 1997,” he recalled, “Consumers are beginning to realize that there is much more to motor sport than just what the indirect media decide to present them with - and canny sponsors are realizing that perhaps there is merit in not heaping such vast promotional money on conventional motorsport. If this is the case then record breaking has a truly tremendous future.

I personally hope that others may be tempted to follow JCB’s example and build their own cars. Success for JCB is going to generate huge global interest for them and could coincide with the decline of conventional motorsport. This is going to be interesting!”

Ron Ayers is one of my favorite “Speed Wrinkles” although he prefers to be called “Speed Wrinkly.” When I saw the car design, I recalled Ron’s fascination with the Summers Brothers Goldenrod - his all-time favorite LSR machine - but thought car looked an awful lot like Mickey Thompson’s Autolite as well.

“I have never even been to Bonneville,” confessed Ayers, “I have a lot of learning to do. There are so many unknowns regarding the salt, we have to learn about the car and its propulsion system, so making grandiose claims is not appropriate. However, the driver is a promising young lad with some potential, so watch this space.”

Contacting Driver/Wing Commander Green at RAF Wittering where the car will be test run before coming to the salt, he revealed, “Bonneville is a place where I still have an unfulfilled date. While I am very proud of my 300 MPH Club membership, it’s not quite the same as one earned on the salt, so now’s the chance to do it properly.”

When I quizzed Ayers if the Goldenrod and Autolite cars were his design muses, he set me straight - as usual. Smart LSR racers will buy Ron a few beers to chat him up about aerodynamics; I promise you’ll learn more at the bar in a few minutes than in months on the salt.

“Well regards to the design influences on the car,” said Ayers, “In practice you start with your own problem and try to solve it in the best way you can. The chances are that it will look like some previous design, because someone else will have encountered similar problems. My geometry is largely controlled by the shapes of the ironmongery that we have to fit inside. It happens to give a front end shape that is similar to the Autolite creation. I believe Mickey Thompson suffered from aerodynamic upload on the front, which had to be countered by ballast. I hope I have got the aerodynamic balance correct so that ballast will not be needed. I did not do wind tunnel tests. I have relied totally on computational fluid dynamics, as I believe this is now more reliable for the design parameters of this vehicle.”