Brown is an extremely rare color for Custom Camaros, making this U.S. casting very desirable for collectors. (Mark Meredith collection)
California Cool
Meets Detroit Muscle

America’s love affair with the automobile was hot and heavy in 1968, and Detroit fed the affair with all the adrenaline it could. The bigger the car the better, and the more horsepower under the hood the happier car owners were. The muscle car movement was firmly entrenched as the decade’s end neared.

Mattel’s Hot Wheels cars swung in at the perfect time. Americans young and old loved everything with four wheels, and with flashy Hot Wheels cars there was finally a toy car that matched the excitement of hot cars lining new-car dealerships and the pages of popular car magazines. Slight rakes, opening hoods exposing V-8 engines, side-exiting exhaust pipes, hood scoops and the metallic paint colors of Hot Wheels cars brought new-found electricity to toy shelves. These features further adorned the most energetic cars on the market: Chevrolet Camaros, Ford Mustangs, Plymouth Barracudas and Ford Thunderbirds. The sparkling paint also dressed some of the most famous custom cars of the day, such as Ed “Bid Daddy” Roth’s Beatnik Bandit and Bill Cushmanbery’s Silhouette.

To cap off the first 16 Hot Wheels cars offered in their inaugural year of 1968, red-striped tires were fitted at all four corners to emulate performance cars of the day. These wheels were developed to roll faster and more smoothly than any other non-motorized toy vehicle of the day, and children appreciated the engineering by begging their parents for a Hot Wheels car with every visit to the store.

Although the look of Hot Wheels cars were the direct result of Mattel designer Harry Bentley Bradley’s Detroit-built 1964 El Camino custom created by the Alexander Brothers, the combination of bright colors and hot subject vehicles gave Hot Wheels cars a “California cool” image. This West Coast image helped the cars ride a wave of popularity that has not wavered in more than 40 years.

Once introduced, Hot Wheels were instantly popular, so much so that a second manufacturing facility was opened in Hong Kong to crank out more of the pocket-size die-cast cars to meet the demand. Before Hot Wheels entered the scene, Matchbox cars ruled the toy-car world. Conventional wisdom held that competing against Matchbox was akin to tugging on Superman’s cape. But the English toy cars instantly became second choices among children as soon as Hot Wheels cars rolled into town.
Beatnik Bandit
Designer: Ed “Big Daddy” Roth

Ed “Big Daddy” Roth was a little crazy, and so were his creations. Beatnik Bandit proved that.

The bubble-topped custom car was truly at its height in the 1960s as hot rodders continued to push the envelop of what was weird and wild. By this time, it took a lot more than a simple shaving and lowering, let alone a chop top, to turn heads on the custom car show circuit. And Roth was the best at dropping jaws. As a Hot Wheels car, Beatnik Bandit did very well. Many children remember this Hot Wheels casting from their youth, and they had good opportunity to be exposed to the car. It swung on the pegs until 1971 and was not outlasted by any other original car.

The famous Ed “Big Daddy” Roth custom was immortalized among children with Mattel’s Hot Wheels cars casting. Beatnik Bandit is pictured here as a U.S. casting in olive with a clear bubble; Hong Kong versions have a blue-tinted bubble. (Colin Bruce III collection)
Custom Barracuda
Designer: Harry Bradley
Additional play value feature: Opening hood

Before there were the muscle-heavy Plymouth ‘Cuda coupes and convertibles in 1970, Chrysler built the Barracuda, a handsome two-door that could be fitted with a six-cylinder to sip fuel or a variety of V-8s that could chug fuel like a frat boy at a kegger. Because the 1970-and-later Plymouth Barracudas, specifically the muscle car ‘Cuda models, are such good-looking cars available with more small-block and big-block engine offerings and even wild colors and graphics, the pre-1970 Barracudas are lost to the spotlight – except by Hot Wheels car collectors.

Of course, when Hot Wheels cars were first offered, Hemi ‘Cuda with hockey stripes and metallic paint were not yet built. Before that would happen, Mattel offered models with hood scoops, nice rakes and in wild spectraflame colors. While toy cars are usually influenced by full-size automobiles, this may be a case when toys eventually influenced the car makers.

Because the pre-1970 Barracuda has been replicated so rarely in scale form, and because of the Custom Barracuda’s great looks and good proportions, it’s a popular car to collect. Like many of the “Customs” from 1968, this Hot Wheels car was built only in 1968 and 1969.

There are Custom Barracudas that feature some United States parts and Hong Kong parts. Many collectors refer to these cars as “hybrid Custom Barracudas,” and due to their rarity, command prices that are two to three times as much as their United States and Hong Kong counterparts. The most notable features of a hybrid Custom Barracuda are a Hong Kong base and hood scoops that end well before the back of the hood.

The Hong Kong-built Custom Barracuda in purple with blue-tinted windows.
(Mark Meredith collection)
A hybrid Custom Barracuda with a Hong Kong base and the clear windows and body of a U.S. casting.
(Mark Meredith collection)

A red U.S. Custom Barracuda with clear windows from the Mattel store display featuring the new-for-'68 Hot Wheels cars.
(Mark Meredith collection)

1968
American Motors Corp. gets serious about building performance cars and introduces two-seat AMX.
An anti-freeze U.S. Custom Barracuda.
(Mark Meredith collection)

A blue U.S. Custom Barracuda.
(Mark Meredith collection)
The U.S. Custom Barracuda in gold.
(Mark Meredith collection)

Aqua adorns this U.S. Custom Barracuda.
(Mark Meredith collection)
Many consider the Custom Camaro to be the first Hot Wheels car offered. By anyone’s count, this car certainly was among the first castings to be released, and in a dizzying amount of variations. Some Custom Camaros have black roofs and some have outlined doors and trunk lids. Because there are so many variations associated with cars produced in the United States and Hong Kong, picking up every version is a challenge for collectors.

The Custom Camaro was available for two years (1968 and 1969) and was a perfect, and memorable, match to the inaugural Hot Wheels line. The Camaro would become an icon of the 1960s, and to Hot Wheels collectors, an icon of the redline era. Even though there remains a large number of Custom Camaros in collectors’ hands, and some still hiding in dusty toy boxes, demand for Custom Camaro outpaces the number available, as reflected in the healthy prices mint examples fetch. If a Custom Camaro sports any single early or low-production feature, or a combination of them, the value of a Custom Camaro can approach that of the popular full-size version.

The lime Custom Camaro on the left shows off its rare matching painted rear tail panel. (Mark Meredith collection)

A white enamel Custom Camaro believed to be a very early car, or perhaps even a prototype. (Mark Meredith collection)
A Hong Kong-built Custom Camaro in an orange some collectors call “pumpkin.”
(Colin Bruce III collection)
A purple hybrid U.S. Camaro with blue-tinted windows usually reserved for Hong Kong castings and a dark interior. (Mark Meredith collection)

This blue U.S. Camaro was included in a 16-car display featuring all of the new-for-'68 Hot Wheels. (Mark Meredith collection)
Custom Corvette
Designer: Harry Bradley
Additional play value feature: Opening hood

Seldom does a toy manufacturer scoop General Motors, but that’s exactly what happened with the Custom Corvette.

New car introductions were closely guarded secrets, and the public always waited with anticipation to see what the new models looked like, particularly in the 1950s and into the 1960s. However, by the late 1960s, there were other social and political factors that were distracting people from what Detroit was doing. But a new Corvette was something every red-blooded American anticipated. Hot Wheels car designer Harry Bradley wanted to model the new Corvette for the exciting Hot Wheels line being built by Mattel, and used his experience to get in the styling studio of his former employer – General Motors – to see what was brewing. After seeing the car, Bradley flew back to California and drafted the Custom Corvette. General Motors may not have been thrilled, but millions of people have since been mesmerized by the 1968 Corvette, both big and small versions.

In the proper light, castings painted an ice version of light blue, such as this U.S. Custom Corvette, show signs of purple beneath the blue paint. Ice blue cars are highly coveted by collectors.
(Mark Meredith collection)
The Custom Corvette in rose. This casting swung from pegs before the fiberglass sports car appeared in Chevrolet showrooms. (Mark Meredith collection)
A lime U.S.-made Custom Corvette.  
(Mark Meredith collection)

Orange adorns this U.S.-built Custom Corvette.  
(Mark Meredith collection)

1968 First new Corvette in five years debuts.
Custom Cougar
Designer: Harry Bradley
Additional play value feature: Opening hood

Maybe it was because it lost the race to market, but when the Ford Mustang’s success caused Mercury to add a pony car of its own with the Cougar for 1967, it was the savvy buyers who took notice. Fortunately, Hot Wheels didn’t ignore the cool cat, and in addition to a Mustang, the company offered the Custom Cougar right at the start. Even though most car collectors pay more for Mustangs than Cougars, it’s the opposite with Hot Wheels Custom Cougars and Custom Mustangs. Dollar-for-dollar, the Custom Cougar almost always beats the Custom Mustangs (variations aside). And when these cars were new, that was exactly the case.

The Custom Cougar was built in both the United States and Hong Kong, and with the usual amount of variations between plants. The most noticeable difference between cars built on opposite sides of the Pacific Ocean is wider taillights on Hong Kong version. Collectors should also watch for Custom Cougars built in Hong Kong with and without a black-painted vinyl top (United States-built Custom Cougars could not be had with the black roof). This casting was available in 1968 and 1969 only.

An array of Custom Cougars in every color, including a very rare brown example, of which less than ten are known to exist. (Mark Meredith collection)
Some Custom Cougars have the tip of the hood painted the hood color, and some grilles have a cougar painted on the passenger side of the grille. Both types are pictured here.

(Mark Meredith collection)

A brown Custom Cougar so rare that its value cannot be estimated.
(Mark Meredith collection)
Custom Eldorado
Designer: Harry Bradley
Additional play value feature: Opening hood

This casting of a personal luxury coupe proves not every Hot Wheels casting from the first year was based on a muscle car or street rod. Even though it was a luxury car, Cadillac’s Fleetwood Eldorado didn’t escape from the hot rod look Harry Bradley applied to every Detroit-based 1968 casting. The Custom Eldorado received a set of exhaust pipes poking out from under the front fender, that soon-to-be-famous rake and power bulges on the hood. Since Bradley had been a designer at Cadillac before coming to Mattel, one has to wonder just how much fun he had adding his creative touches to the work of his former coworkers. Collectors, and Bradley’s former coworkers, had their chance to buy a new Custom Eldorado on the pegs in 1968 and 1969 only.

Green and blue Custom Eldorados, both products of Mattel’s Hong Kong manufacturing plant.
(Pete Cambio collection)
A Hong Kong-built Custom Eldorado in blue.
(Pete Cambio collection)
Custom Firebird
Designer: Harry Bradley
Additional play value feature: Opening hood

Just as Mattel mated up the first-generation Ford Mustang and its corporate cousin, the Mercury Cougar, it included both of General Motors’ F-body modes. And also like the Mustang and Cougar, designers included different body styles of the corporate cousins, which helped ensure the castings would remain distinct from one another.

In the process of adding a California touch to the 1967 Pontiac Firebird convertible, Bradley exaggerated the length, and combined with the casting’s convertible nature, Custom Firebird is one long-looking Hot Wheels car, even with the rake. Slide Custom Firebird up against Custom Camaro, and the additional length becomes clear – it’s more than just a visual effect.

A flock of Custom Firebirds in light blue, green and aqua ready for flight. (Pete Cambio collection)
A Hong Kong-built Custom Firebird, the only convertible in the 1968 lineup.  
(Pete Cambio collection)

A U.S.-built Custom Firebird exhibiting U.S. clear windows and painted light blue. This Custom Firebird also illustrates desirable door lines.  
(Pete Cambio collection)
Custom Fleetside
Designer: Harry Bradley
*Additional play value feature:* Opening tonneau cover

The casting with the direct lineage to what started Hot Wheels cars down orange track is none other than the Custom Fleetside. While it's not exactly modeled after Hot Wheels cars designer Harry Bradley's El Camino that helped Elliot Handler illustrate what it was he was looking for in a new die-cast car, Custom Fleetside incorporates nearly all of the features of Harry Bradley's daily ride in the mid-1960s, a tricked-out El Camino built for Bradley by Detroit's Alexander Brothers.

When given a blank sheet of paper upon arriving at Mattel, Bradley was given free reign. While some artists enjoy such a work environment, what he was drawing was not what Handler was looking for. Unfortunately, Handler could not express what he was looking for until one day, he pointed to Bradley's bright yellow 1964 Chevrolet El Camino in the parking lot. While working for GM, Bradley had Mike and Larry Alexander chop the El Camino's roof and add the wide sail panels of a 1963 Pontiac Grand Prix to the vehicle. A hood scoop, red-striped tires and mag wheels made the hot package even tougher.

After Bradley knew to use his El Camino's modifications as the basis for creating Hot Wheels cars, he added the custom features to all of the Detroit-built cars he modeled. But instead of re-creating his mid-size El Camino in scale, he stepped up to the bigger Chevrolet C10 with a Fleetside box when he added a truck to the line. Even though they're different animals, signs of Bradley's El Camino are clear as a bright yellow school bus in Custom Fleetside. All examples of this casting were offered in 1968 and 1969 only and all feature a black roof.

A U.S. Custom Fleetside in dark blue.
(Mark Meredith collection)
Custom Fleetside is the most direct descendant of designer Harry Bradley’s 1964 El Camino, the vehicle that formed the magical equation for Hot Wheels’ success. Made in the U.S., the light purple Custom Fleetside reflected the cool California car scene of the 1960s.
(Mark Meredith collection)
Custom Mustang
Designer: Harry Bradley
Additional play value feature: Opening hood

Perhaps it was only a coincidence of fate, but Steve McQueen was thrashing a metallic green 1968 Mustang GT fastback on the streets of San Francisco across movie screens when one of the most popular of the first Hot Wheels started dangling from store pegs. Regardless of whether their parents had taken them to see the movie, thousands of children re-enacted McQueen’s chase scenes from “Bullitt” with their own Mustang fastback on sidewalks and kitchen floors and probably didn’t even know it.

Of course, Hot Wheels’ Custom Mustang came in more colors than green, and given the lack of side marker lights, the toy is more likely based on the very similar 1967 model. And even if there’s not a movie connection, Custom Mustang would be among the hottest of the first Hot Wheels cars, given the full-size car’s deserved desirability and Bradley’s masterful execution of the Mustang in scale.

Like so many of the Customs from 1968, Custom Mustang only lived on through 1969, but Mustang fans do not need to worry: the casting was followed by other Mustang fastbacks in the Hot Wheels line.

The louvered rear window Custom Mustangs are a favorite with collectors.
(Mark Meredith collection)
This watermelon-colored Custom Mustang was offered only in the 16-car store display used to show off the new Hot Wheels cars. (Mark Meredith collection)

The antifreeze U.S. Custom Mustang didn’t stop kids from getting overheated for their Hot Wheels cars. (Mark Meredith collection)

A creamy pink U.S. Custom Mustang. (Mark Meredith collection)

A lime U.S. Custom Mustang. (Mark Meredith collection)
Honey, I’m home! This U.S. Custom Mustang is painted a shade of gold collectors fondly refer to as honey. (Mark Meredith collection)

A Custom Mustang by any other name would still be rose. (Mark Meredith collection)

Purple coats this U.S. Custom Mustang. (Mark Meredith collection)

U.S.-built Custom Mustang shown in red. (Mark Meredith collection)
A Hong Kong-manufactured and highly sought Custom Mustang in triple red with the blue-tinted windows typical to Hong Kong castings of all types. (Mark Meredith collection)
Custom T-Bird
Designer: Harry Bradley
Additional play value feature: Opening hood

The Thunderbird was a personal luxury car for nights on the town and jaunts to the country club. In copper, and with a black top, Hot Wheels’ Custom T-Bird fit the image, while the hood scoop, redlines and side-exiting exhaust pipes added the hot rod flavor Harry Bradley was going for. In the end, Bradley’s version was fit for neither occasion. Custom T-Bird would have been more at home on the downtown drag strip, its engine revving in anticipation of a street race with a big-block Caprice coupe in the next lane.

Beginning in 1967, Ford Thunderbirds could be purchased as four-door sedans, but fortunately Bradley stuck with the quintessential four-seat Thunderbird coupe for his Hot Wheels cars casting, formal roof and all. All Custom T-Birds were built from 1968 through 1969, and nearly all of them carry black roofs.

The Custom T-Bird was available with or without a black-painted roof, although these castings all feature the black roof.
(Colin Bruce III collection)
This Hong Kong-made green Custom T-Bird is pictured in green with a white interior.
(Colin Bruce III collection)

(Mark Meredith collection)

A U.S.-built Custom T-Bird in purple with clear windows and sporting a black interior.
(Colin Bruce III collection)

Custom T-Birds can be found with and without black painted roofs, as exhibited by this red duo.
(Mark Meredith collection)
Custom Volkswagen

Designer: Ira Gilford
Additional play value feature: Opening sunroof

Volkswagen Beetles had been exponentially gaining in popularity since the 1950s, and by the time Hot Wheels were being dreamed up, the cars were among the most popular cars for the Southern California youth set. Wild colors and painted flowers personalized many Volkswagens during the days of flower power, and even unnatural appendages could be found hanging off the sides of some VW's employed as business calling cards.

Despite all of the creative influences exercised on the Beetle, Mattel designers found their own way to trick out the bubble-shaped Beetle by moving the engine up front and making it poke out of the round hood. Like other Custom models from 1968, the Beetle also received exhaust pipes that poked out from under the body and that Hot Wheels rake. By the time the designer's pen stopped and the manufacturing ended, there was no doubting the Custom Volkswagen was a member of the Hot Wheels line.

Custom Volkswagens were offered from 1968 TO 1971, and since Hot Wheels cars were required to have a working feature, nearly all feature an opening sunroof.

A rose U.S.-built Custom Volkswagen. (Colin Bruce III collection)

Orange coats this U.S. Custom Volkswagen. (Colin Bruce III collection)

U.S.-built Custom Volkswagens, shown at left, feature headlamps formed as part of the body. At right is a Hong Kong-built Custom Volkswagen exhibiting the headlamps formed as part of the chassis and exposed through holes in the body. (Colin Bruce III collection)
An array of U.S.-built Custom Volkswagens in orange, magenta, antifreeze, rose and lime.
(Colin Bruce III collection)
Deora
Designer: Harry Bradley
Additional play value feature: Removable surf boards

Harry Bradley paid homage to the Detroit-based builders of his daily-driver El Camino by including the Deora in the first line of Hot Wheels cars. The Alexander Brothers built the Deora as a show vehicle for Chrysler Corp.

The original Deora started as a Dodge A100 midsize truck, but it was barely recognizable by the time the Alexander Brothers chopped and diced the hauler into a sleek, wind-cheating machine. The Hot Wheels’ Deora was based on a Dodge concept truck built by the Alexander Brothers. It’s shown here in light green and as a U.S.-built casting. (Mark Meredith collection)

Deora’s first public appearance was at the 1967 Detroit Autorama where it won the Don Ridler Memorial Award, the second of three Ridler awards that the Alexander brothers would receive.

The Alexander brothers operated out of Michigan, and when Bradley penned it down to 1:64, his boss thought it was missing that California touch. Much to Bradley’s dismay, Hot Wheels creator Elliot Handler wanted the casting to sport surfboards to increase play value since the car didn’t feature an opening hood. Handler got what he wanted, and Bradley was pleased with the outcome.

All Deoras sport a yellow and orange plastic surfboard on the black bed cover, both of which poke through the rear window into the cab. This casting was offered in 1968 and 1969.
Ford J-Car

*Additional play value feature:* Opening rear engine cover that is hinged at rear

The Deora wasn’t the only low-production and unattainable-to-the-general-public car to strike Hot Wheels’ 1968 line: the Ford J-Car prototype racing machine was also part of the action. Even though the full-size version of this car was raced by Carroll Shelby, it hasn’t affected the car’s value among collectors.

Today, this casting remains a bargain to the redline collector and a particularly attractive example of early Hot Wheels cars history to beginning hobbyists. Shelby has worked his magic on many automobiles and made them extremely valuable rides, but the value of this casting is not one of them: Mint examples of most colors can be found regularly in the $35 range, a downright steal in the world of redlines.

The Ford J-Car was offered from 1968 through 1971 and was the only original Hot Wheels casting to include a sticker sheet.

Ford begins offering a new Flexible Torino model that can be built as a plush coupe or sedan for the businessman or a road warrior for the recent high school graduate.

The Ford J-Car came with a hinged rear engine area.

(Edward Wershba photo)
Hot Heap
Designer: Don Tognotti

Although it does not carry a very complimentary name, Hot Wheels cars’ Hot Heap is actually a hot little rod with all the goodies of a fine 1960s Model T street rod. From the built small-block 283-cid engine to the diamond-tufted interior, there was a lot for any hot rodder, young or old, to enjoy in this casting.

Like several other hot rods in the 1968 Hot Wheels line, this casting is actually based on a famous hot rod. The car was based on the Oakland Roadster Show “America’s Most Beautiful Roadster” award-winning Model T hot rod of Don Tognotti, which he named “King T.” What is most surprising about this casting, however, is that it lacks any moving parts, nearly a prerequisite by Mattel management for a design to join the first year’s line of Hot Wheels. Regardless, children enjoyed the casting from the beginning of Hot Wheels production until it was no longer offered at the end of 1971.
Python/Cheetah
Designer: Bill Cushenbery

What’s in a name? Well, it can mean the difference between a few $20 bills and hundreds of $20 bills. When this casting was originally built in Hong Kong, it was stamped with the name “Cheetah” on the base, and such examples are extremely rare and extremely valuable. All United States castings and the bulk of Hong Kong castings of this Hot Wheels car carry the custom’s best-known name “Python.” Ironically, the actual car this toy is based on carried neither of these names.

A Hong Kong-built Python in green. This casting was originally called “Cheetah,” but the name was quickly changed to Python. Only a very small number of castings with the Cheetah name exist. (Colin Bruce III collection)

1968
Plymouth brings serious, budget-minded performance to the streets with its new Road Runner, a cartoon only in name, while Dodge matches its sibling’s strategy with the Super Bee.

The Car Craft magazine staff dreamed it up in 1961; Bill Cushenbery built it in 1963; and Hot Wheels down-sized it to fit in a pocket in 1968. The full-size version of this casting was known as the Car Craft Dream Rod, but Hot Wheels gave their toy its own name. Some speculate that the name was changed by Mattel from Cheetah to Python because Chevrolet owned the name and used it on a high-powered car that was intended to beat the Shelby Cobras. As such, the company was very protective of the use of the name Cheetah on other vehicles. This casting was offered from 1968 through 1971.

Rarity Alert: Besides the name, Python could be found with a few other variations, but these only affect the value in a mild manner. The value of Cheetahs is not estimable, but examples are believed to be worth in excess of $10,000.
Silhouette
Designer: Bill Cushenbery

One of the most popular but least valuable Hot Wheels castings from 1968 is the Silhouette, and therein lies the rub. Because nearly every kid had one of these toy versions of the Bill Cushenbery-designed show car, the car’s popularity made it a common Hot Wheels car when it was new, thus many examples still survive.

For those keeping count, Silhouette is the second of two 1968 castings based on Bill Cushenbery’s full-size custom cars, and also one of two bubble-topped cars in 1968, the other being the Beatnik Bandit. After this year, Cushenbery’s work would not be seen on another new Hot Wheels cars casting and bubbletops would be reserved for race cars and other sci-fi-like creations.
Travel through the remarkable first decade of pioneer pocket-sized Hot Wheels cars with this dynamic and detailed book. Learn how these miracles from Mattel changed the die-cast car market, and toy collecting forever; while getting the insider’s view of Hot Wheels design.

This big and bold book proudly showcases more than 500 stunning color photographs of some of the finest Hot Wheels from the original crew. In addition to the up-close-and-personal photos, each car is identified, along with the name of the designer, and a concise but intriguing background story about each car. Plus, you’ll find Rarity Alerts and Hot Wheels historical points featured throughout the book, adding yet another unique touch to a one-of-a-kind tribute to the Hot Wheels Redline revolution.

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