

And All in the Privacy of Your Own Car!



by Ralph Keyes

I became interested in the car as private space when friends of mine began screaming inside their automobiles.

The first person to tell me about this, a father of five in his late thirties, explained that within his van, driving to and from work, was the only time he felt free to rage—spit and holler—let it all out. He called it his Private Therapy Van. Just roll up the windows and howl, go crazy if you like. No one will ever know.

I've been wondering since how much the quest for privacy has to do with our car population boom. America's automobile growth rate is double that of the human one. At the present pace of car-per-passenger increase, one car in three will be tooling along without a driver by 1980.

It's a truism that cars are so popular because they're individualized.

Nothing can compare with the automobile for getting you from here to there when you wish, by the route you want to take, without having to put up with other human beings.

This auto population explosion concerns us for a variety of social and environmental reasons, but what we rarely consider is that the car has become the only place many of us have where we can be alone. That's the unspoken reason so many of us crave a personal car. As futurist Don Fabun puts it, "The reason the average passenger car carries only 1.5 passengers is that the .5 passenger can't talk back."

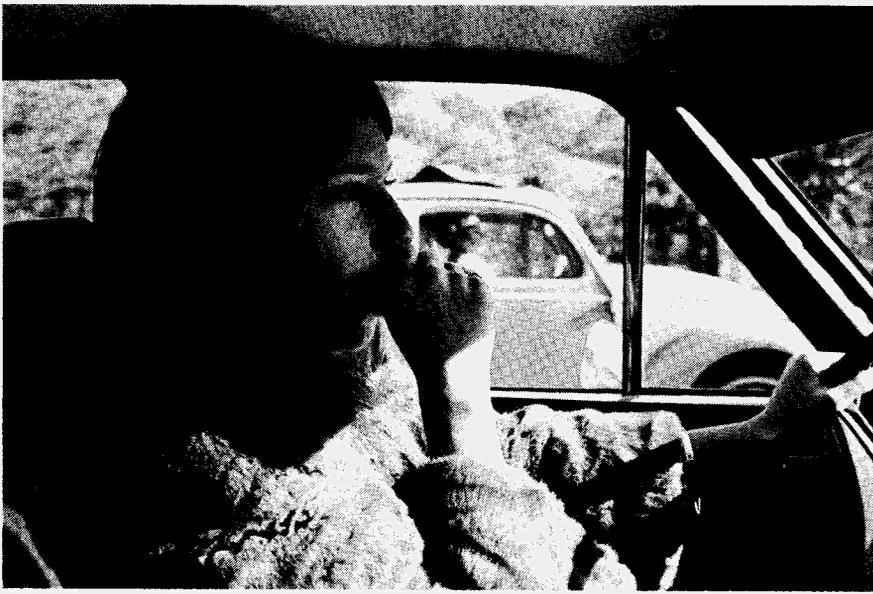
For those of us in city and suburb, automobiles have become our most personal space. Inside the car and the bathroom are the only places one has a pretty good chance of being left alone. And the car more so than the bathroom: no one can knock and

tell you to hurry up.

My friend with his Private Therapy Van intrigued me, and I began asking what they did alone in a car, mentioning that one guy I knew screamed. With amazing frequency faces would light up and heads nod vigorously as they heard this. "Hey, me too," they'd say. "I scream in my car too sometimes, but I didn't know anyone else did."

One friend, a college counselor, said he shouts on the freeway whenever his tension and anger has reached the boiling point. He mentioned his in-car screaming once to a meeting of colleagues and found several nodding, laughing, saying they did the same. Sometimes they advised clients to follow suit.

A San Mateo schoolteacher began screaming in her car two years ago, on the advice of a therapist. This thera-



pist had suggested vigorous shouting, laughing, crying—anything to let off tension. But my friend lives in an apartment and said she had no place to do this. No problem, replied the therapist, just get in your car, roll up the windows, turn on the radio, take off, and let loose.

I was riding in my car
 screaming at the night
 screaming at the dark
 screaming at fright
 i wasn't doing nothing
 just driving about
 screaming at the dark
 that's all i was doing
 just
 letting it out
 well along comes a motorcycle
 very much to my surprise
 i said officer was i speeding
 i couldn't see his eyes
 he said no you weren't speeding
 and he felt where his gun was hung
 he said lady you were screaming
 at the top of your lung
 and you were
 doing it alone
 you were doing it alone
 you were screaming in your car
 in a twenty-mile zone
 you were doing it alone
 you were doing it alone
 you were screaming

i said i'll roll up all my windows
 don't want to disturb the peace
 i'm just a creature
 who is looking
 for a little release

i said animals roar
 when they feel like
 why can't we do that too
 instead of screaming
 banzai baby
 in the war in the human zoo
 he said i got to take you in now
 follow me right behind
 and let's have no more screaming
 like you're out of your mind
 so he climbed aboard his cycle
 and his red-eyed headlight beamed
 and his motor started spinning
 and his siren screamed

he was doing it alone
 he was doing it alone
 he was screaming on his bike
 in a twenty-mile zone
 he was doing it alone
 he was doing it alone
 he was screaming
 i was doing it alone
 i was doing it alone
 i was screaming in my car
 in a twenty-mile zone
 i was doing it alone
 i was doing it alone
 i was screaming

"twenty-mile zone," by Dory Previn.
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I wondered, midst this in-car cacophony, if there weren't some formal or semi-formal movement afoot. The screaming part itself isn't so bizarre.

From Primal Screaming to Bio-Energetics, loud vocal emissions have become a common part of therapy. But doing it in an automobile did seem unusual—imaginative certainly, and logical once you think about it—but still, unusual.

Viola Litt Callaghan, a Transactional Analyst in San Francisco, said she got the idea from her work as a traveling auditor nearly 25 years ago. She was taking singing lessons at the time and used to practice in the car during long, lonely hours on the road.

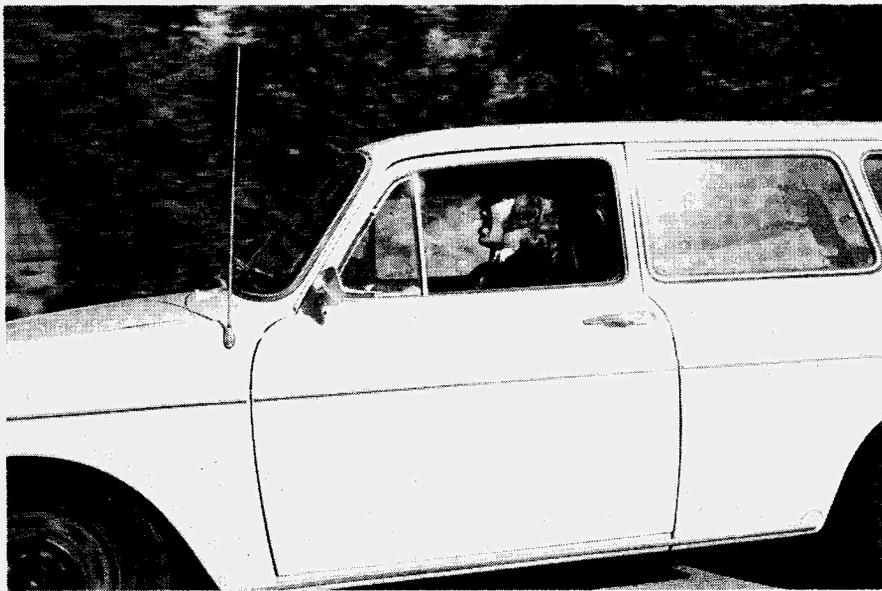
Later, after becoming a therapist, Ms. Callaghan started advising clients to let off steam loudly from time to time. But most pleaded lack of a private place to do this. At home, even in the bathroom, the family might hear—or neighbors. Remembering her own in-car singing, Ms. Callaghan started saying, "No problem. Just get in your car, roll up the windows, turn on the radio, take off, and let loose." (It was she who so advised the San Mateo schoolteacher.)

Ms. Callaghan knows other counselors who recommend bathroom screaming (in the shower especially), but no one else who recommends the car. She raised the question at the recent meeting of Transactional Analysts in San Francisco and found only one other colleague—a woman who advised clients to make faces while driving.

Of several other therapists I talked to, including some who advise clients to shout in cars, none knew of any others encouraging this trend. Most had just discovered the practice for themselves while driving, and passed on the tip to their clients.

Screaming is only the most dramatic example of private behavior within the car. Columnist Art Seidenbaum of the *Los Angeles Times* says he knows novelists who construct paragraphs inside, an insomniac who finds freeways his most relaxing environment, and one father who uses time driving alone to argue with his family so he can be nice when they're around.

Jack Smith, Seidenbaum's colleague at the *Times*, calls freeway time "the only time we're free; free from the telephone, free from things we ought to be doing, free from any kind of interruption but the occasion-



al necessity of prudent steering or braking to avoid catastrophe." Smith got so much response to this position that two follow-up columns were necessary to handle the load. One woman, an anthropology teacher, wrote Smith that she found freeway time "glorious." "Those times of privacy and contemplation, of separateness and selfness, when one can be truly alone and thoughtful. I sometimes think freeway driving was made for philosophical thought and problem-solving as no other situation can afford."

My own informal survey has uncovered everything from thumb-sucking to masturbation going on within cars. Nose-picking is the runaway first choice for in-car entertainment, the most common activity on the freeway after driving. Singing is also quite common, and my personal choice for time alone in our Saab. I yodel, badly, and find other drivers are the only people who will put up with it—so long as my windows are tightly closed.

One woman I interviewed, a mother in her forties, confided that she often sucks her thumb while driving. I asked if that were a life-long habit and the woman replied, no, that it began just over a year ago when she asked her six-year-old why he sucked his thumb and he said it tasted good. He suggested that she try it. It was a suggestion she couldn't refuse, so the mother tried it, and liked it. Now this woman reports sucking her thumb regularly, but only when alone. Some-

times this means at home and, more often, while driving.

A sociology professor with whom I discussed in-car phenomena says he engages radio announcers in dialogue, even yelling back when they're especially dumb. He also practices speeches in the car.

Another teacher of sociology, a Ph.D. in her late thirties, says she used to masturbate while driving the lonely roads of Texas as a girl. But this is much more difficult on California's freeways, she reports, especially with all the semis passing by, and an occasional convoy of Marines.

A young Los Angeles swinger, interviewed recently by two television reporters, was not so inhibited. "I even do it in my car," she told them, "driving down the freeway when the traffic is bumper to bumper and getting all upset about it. One hand stays on the steering wheel and the other hand goes on me."

Alternative activities which my survey turned up included crying, line-learning for plays, dictating, fantasizing, and "telling myself secrets."

Traffic patrolmen I interviewed made allusions to wild in-car goings-on they had seen, but always were vague about details. One San Diego sergeant told me he'd seen "Everything from making love to smoking marijuana," but, when pressed for verification, admitted that the most torrid thing he'd observed in 14 years was a guy driving a Corvette at 85 miles an hour with a girl on his lap. "I did see a guy playing a harmonica

once," he added.

Other policemen told me of seeing drivers shaving, eating, applying make-up, filing their nails, combing hair, reading, and, of course, picking their noses. Women especially seem to sing a lot, one told me, and many drivers seem just to be talking to themselves. He said you can tell the difference by whether the driver's head is keeping time with the movement of their lips.

Some of the policemen were philosophical about all of this: of course you'll get distracted while driving; I do. Others were very stern: drivers should pay attention to driving and nothing else.

There is a safety question involved in the insulation of today's cars. At 70 miles per hour on a smoothly flowing freeway, with the windows closed, air conditioning on, tape deck blaring, and mind off on a business deal—who notices the car ahead screeching to a halt as a dog crosses the road?

Rear-end collisions, which constitute a high percentage of all accidents, usually result from such inattention. But this is difficult to prove, as is the role of distraction in any collision. Some accident reports do note whether the radio or air conditioner was on in any of the cars involved. But what driver will admit to taking a bite out of a ham sandwich just before an accident, let alone screaming?

Though the role of personality factors in causing accidents is subject to much debate, there is general agreement that the use of automobiles to express aggression is widespread, and a common contributor to accidents. One 1966 study of South African drivers found that those classed as high-accident risks scored low on control of aggression and high on anxiety, while demonstrating frequent incidence of antisocial attitudes. (As judged by the Thematic Apperception and Social Relations Tests.) The maker of this study concluded that people drive as they would *like* to live.

Or, as one English observer put it, a driver doesn't *change* behind the wheel. "His personality does not change. There is one significant difference: when the driver is in his own car there is more freedom to demonstrate the presence of unsocial, irresponsible and, even, antisocial

traits.”

A Viennese newspaper, the *Kurier*, once asked readers aged 9 to 14 to write in about their fathers' driving habits. Some of the responses included:

- “You will not believe such a lovely father can curse so loudly.”

- “Father shouted at pedestrians, Mother shouted at Father, and they both got so cross my father almost lost control of himself and the car.”

- “At first it is cold and the engine will not start, so father's cursing starts right away. Then a car passes us, and Father curses the driver. He has to step on the brakes. When he starts again, we continue our excursion and our cursing.”

Walter Cronkite tells of being viciously side-swiped one afternoon by a blue-and-white four-door sedan with a dent on the right front door. At a dinner party that night, hosted by a biology professor of impeccable courtesy, Cronkite recounted the incident. All present agreed that even civilized men can become brutes when protected by two tons of glass and steel. As the evening ended, the host offered his guest a ride home, in his blue-and-white four-door sedan, which, Cronkite noticed as he got in, had a dent in the right front door.

“There is good reason to presume,” writes Dr. F. A. Whitlock, a forensic psychiatrist interested in drivers behavior, “that a large number of otherwise mild-mannered persons manifest surprisingly aggressive behavior once they get behind the steering wheel of their cars. The irrational nature of much of this conduct can be inferred from the quality of the behavior and its expression by persons who normally show most of the features of civilized, social restraint.”

But the question remains, which face is more real: the civilized, restrained pedestrian, or the aggressive, hostile driver? The point is that within the privacy of one's car, protected by all that metal and virtual anonymity, one is free to engage in behavior rarely permitted “in public.” The question thus is not so much “What do you do in your car?” as “What do you do in private?”

Air conditioning has fundamentally altered the social role of private motor vehicles. In the first half-century of

our automobility, very few cars were air conditioned. The proportion of cars built with air conditioning in 1955 was just over one percent and, by 1964, the proportion was still only 18 percent. By 1970, however, the figure had shot up to nearly 60 percent, this not to mention the million or so air conditioning units which are installed annually on unequipped cars.

In order to retain the conditioned air (and keep out the spray of automatic car washers), seals on car windows and doors have improved markedly in recent years. As a result, people who first rolled up their windows to enjoy their new air conditioning have found that driving is pleasanter all around that way, smoother, quieter. You can hear the radio better.

This is the practical effect of air conditioning and its poor relation, better vent systems. The social effect is to make driving ever more insular and private an affair.

Craig Hodgetts used to be confused, and hurt, when he'd draw up beside his girlfriend in Los Angeles, and try to get her attention without any luck whatsoever. Hodgetts, a young architect-planner who had just recently come out from New York, couldn't understand why she was so oblivious to his honking and waving.

But after driving around the city with her a few times, Hodgetts finally understood. The girl's car was a Mercedes, air conditioned, with plush upholstery and a tape deck. “Finally,” he says, “I perceived L.A. I got into the reality that the destination makes no difference whatsoever. Driving is a completely sensual experience. Put ‘Clockwork Orange’ on the cassette, sit back—look at the lights—kinesthetic. The sound, the air conditioning, the windows rolled up all reinforce the feeling that your car is a controlled environment completely your own. It's like sitting at a drive-in movie except you're moving along.”

Hodgetts taught a course at the California Institute of the Arts that year, one called “Social Design” in which the students were asked to describe their most intimate space. For the majority it was their car. The 20 or so students were largely 18 to 20 years old, had just left home, and could claim no other environment to call their own. “It was clear,” Hod-



gets finally deduced, “that the auto was their most personal space. There were lots of yearnings wrapped up in that thing.”

Many of the students had vans which they would use to get away in, or even as mobile staging platforms for media productions. But since the car itself was the meeting point for owner and friends, going somewhere—to a drive-in or the like—wasn't really necessary. The vehicle was its own destination. Even owners of small Volkswagens reported these as intimate space. Some said they'd go out to the parking lot and sit in the back seat of their beetles sometimes, just to get away from it all.

The car as personal space is a topic almost completely overlooked by those interested in automobility, environments, or human behavior in seclusion. In a widely quoted observation, Buckminster Fuller once called automobiles simply an extension of the house, a front porch with wheels. But this misses the point entirely: the car is one of our least public spaces, a hideaway which is private on the road and more private yet when driven into seclusion.

Don Fabun has noted in passing how seductively private our cars have become, as has anthropologist Edward T. Hall who once observed, “Certainly one factor in people's de-



sire to commute by car is the need for privacy and relief from crowding . . . it may be the only time of day when nobody can intrude." Hall also devoted a section of his book, *The Hidden Dimension*, to the "sensory deprivation" of our highly insulated driving in automobiles.

With the exception of such asides, I've found no study or even thought devoted to the question of solitary in-car behavior. A check with traffic institutes at the Universities of California (Berkeley and Los Angeles) and Michigan, as well as the Motor Vehicle Manufacturer's Association and National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration uncovered no study of lone driver behavior. Most researchers I talked to seemed intrigued by the topic, but none knew of any empirical research even touching on this area. The closest thing mentioned was one study of how many hands drivers keep on the wheel, and another tally done from an overpass on the frequency of shoulderbelt use.

Commerce, as usual, is far ahead of the academy in smelling this social trend. The cars Detroit produces grow ever more insulated and equipped to entertain lone drivers. FM radios have become common in cars and the renaissance of that medium is based on driver-listeners. A whole sub-commerce has grown up around

cassette instruction tapes, which are often marketed specifically for in-car listening. And Auto-Tape tours can now be purchased for five dollars, cassettes which make it unnecessary to leave the privacy of one's car to tour regions, cities, and national parks.

The amount of time we spend in cars will rise before it falls, as will the proportion of us driving alone. And the time we spend alone in cars will grow ever more insulated to cope with the blur and whoosh of freeway speeds. So, too, the ways we'll devise to entertain ourselves in those long, lonely hours in cars will diversify.

This could be seen as a problem—a highway safety problem especially. Firemen with whom I've talked say they're already driving more defensively to cope with drivers who don't respond to their siren. One veteran of 13 years driving a fire truck says its far harder to get cars to pull over now than before—partly because there are more of them, and partly because cars are more soundproofed, their drivers distracted by stereo, "and some of them wearing those damned earmuffs [earphones]."

But this is not really a car problem so much as a privacy problem. The car is so attractive as a place to be alone only because we have so few alternative opportunities for seclusion in city or suburb. We will not successfully confront any of the social problems posed by automobiles until we deal first with the related issue of privacy.

Privacy, in the physical sense, means simply a place to be alone. In the psychological sense, privacy means freedom to be one's self. For most of us, that's only alone.

After recording "twenty-mile zone" on her first album, Dory Previn had friends of years' standing come to her and confess the length to which *they* had gone in seeking a place to scream. One friend turned on all the faucets in the bathroom, then let loose. Another took private flying lessons so she could howl among the clouds without fear of being locked up. (One traffic sergeant I interviewed said that if he or his men saw a driver screaming, "We'd be likely to stop them because they'd be likely to be mentally unbalanced.")

Before we can deal successfully with our hunger for a personal car, we must provide as well for each person's need of a place to call their own—a personal space. Everyone needs a space which belongs to them alone, and few of us have it—in our homes, or anywhere. "We've got to have a type of housing that gives more privacy," says Margaret Mead, "so that young parents, for example, don't have to go sit in the car to have a conversation out of earshot of their children."

Psychologist Sidney Jourard has long argued that a healthy society must provide places for seclusion, for emotional respite, to all its members. He recommends that each community provide not only hospitals, but retreat centers where people can retire in privacy for an emotional recharge. Were such centers available, he speculates, we might have much less need for mental hospitals.

Just as important as a physical opportunity for privacy is the psychological opportunity—the community of people among whom we can take off our shoes and relax, be ourselves, scream if we'd like, or just pick our noses. So long as we can be ourselves only when alone, and so long as alone is only in our cars, more and more of us will be picking our noses there, as well as masturbating, screaming, arguing with the disc jockey, telling off the family, whatever it is that we're scared to do in the presence of others.

After her marriage to André Previn broke up, Dory Previn broke down—or "broke through" as she calls it—and was locked up in a mental institution. It was there that she wrote "twenty-mile zone" and other verse, which she has since put to song and recorded. After being released, Ms. Previn got involved in ongoing group therapy. (Her third album was dedicated to "Gestalt.") As a result, she may no longer need to scream in cars, because there's a better place to do it—even with others present.

And yet, she says, "We are all alone, we are all minorities of one, doing these so-called weird things, but if we know that another person is doing them alone, too, then at least we're doing them together." ■