

Penta

The Cars of 'Better Call Saul'

By

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Patrick Fabian as Howard Hamlin in "Better Call Saul."
Greg Lews/AMC/Sony Pictures Television

Even a passing fan of the popular TV series "*Better Call Saul* (the prequel to *Breaking Bad*) notices the beat up jalopy belonging to lead character and con man James McGill. You can't miss it. A mustard yellow, Suzuki Esteem with mismatched paint and dents, dings and scratches galore, its putt-putt engine has to be repeatedly coaxed into life. The car screams loser.

But it's a chrysalis and fits in perfectly with grifter "Slippin Jimmy" before McGill morphs into Saul Goodman, a successful but corrupt lawyer defending drug dealers in Albuquerque in *Breaking Bad*. Then he switches to a pearl white Cadillac De Ville, complete with "Lwyer Up" license plates.

Gear heads probably have noticed the special cars in the show, like Nacho's AMC Javelin. Some are classic or unusual cars, long gone into automotive history and forgotten. Others are boring, but for a reason. Most importantly,

however, the automobiles are particular. That is, what most folks likely don't know, the vehicles are "cast"—almost like actors—for each main actor.

The showrunners pick the cars with the character's personality in mind, says Dennis Milliken, the BCS Transportation Coordinator and a 40-year plus entertainment veteran. For example, he presents the writers with a selection of wheels based on their ideas about the role and actor, and then the writers select the cars. The writers liked the name "Esteem" for James McGill, for his obvious lack of it, and they wanted a small compact with mismatched paint, he says.



Jimmy McGill's (Bob Odenkirk) mustard yellow Suzuki Esteem.
Ursula Coyote/Sony Pictures Television/AMC

The show's creators Vince Gilligan and Peter Gould are "extremely involved" in the vehicle choices, right down to the color," adds Milliken, who worked in similar capacities on such shows as *Breaking Bad*, *Lonesome Dove* *Dallas*, and many others.

In BCS, for example, the character of Nacho drives a beautiful, red 1973 Javelin with white racing stripes. While you will occasionally see a '70s era Chevy Camaro on the road today, Javelins are a rare muscle car breed. It was produced for only a few years by American Motors, the oft troubled fourth U.S. carmaker (think Gremlin and Pacer) eventually taken over by Chrysler, which wanted to get its hands on AMC's now immensely popular and profitable Jeep line.

Why does Nacho drive a Javelin? He is the up and coming but mid-level thug and lieutenant of Hector Salamanca, a drug kingpin. But Nacho is also that uncommon, thoughtful criminal who is ambivalent about his role in the crime family and is thinking of somehow getting out of the "life."

By the way, a Javelin cost about US \$3,000 in 1973 and today is worth US\$20,000 to US\$40,000, depending on the condition and submodel.



Nacho Varga's (Michael Mando) Javelin.
Greg Lewis/AMC/Sony Pictures Television

On the other hand, the character of Lalo, Eduardo Salamanca, nephew of Hector, is an enthusiastic and enterprising enforcer of the family's territorial prerogatives. He drives a pretty, green 1970 Chevy Monte Carlo.

The Monte Carlo isn't generally considered a classic muscle car and was originally pitched by Detroit as a luxury step up from the Camaro. But Lalo is mechanically inclined and has tuned it into a very fast automobile. Like his car, Lalo oozes power and menace under a thin veil of faux civility. Lalo pretty much can get anything he wants in life and he likes the muscle cars, says Milliken.

There's a memorable scene with Lalo racing furiously around a dirt track in his Monte Carlo and Nacho watching, probably wondering how he might leave the Salamancas without getting himself and his straight arrow father killed in revenge by the gang.

Today, a 1970 Monte Carlo goes for US\$20,000 to US\$33,000, again depending on the condition and submodel. It was sold by Chevrolet for about US\$3,500 in 1970.

One of the more interesting auto choices, and not for the uniqueness of the vehicle, but for pure irony was the 1998 Volvo station wagon for Gus Fring, the rich, urbane but dangerous Albuquerque-based drug boss, and a Salamanca rival.

What's better for a criminal than an unobtrusive soccer-mom car known for safety? Fring plays up his ties to the community through his cover as the owner of Los Pollos Hermanos fast food restaurant, with scenes of him giving talks to the local first responders. Fring, along with his Volvo, is hiding in plain sight.



Mike Ehrmantraut's (Jonathan Banks) 1988 Chrysler 5th Avenue.
Michele K.Short/AMC/Sony Pictures Television

Next up is Mike Ehrmantraut, for-hire fixer, and a former corrupt Philadelphia police officer with a guilt complex after getting his cop son killed back East. He abandoned the City of Brotherly Love for New Mexico and drives a 1988 Chrysler 5th Avenue, a kind of boxy, nondescript car that suits him. It's a bit of luxury but nothing special and doesn't stand out in a crowd because it's solid, brown and regular, like Mike—almost. Last but not least is the 1998 shiny, racing green Jaguar XJ8 (remember BCS is set in the 2002-03 time frame) that belongs to the character of Howard Hamelin, head of the law firm Hamelin Hamelin McGill, where Jimmy once worked. It was founded by his brother Charles McGill and Howard's father.

The British luxury car's upper-class accent matches Howard's attitude. He isn't much of a lawyer but is a sharp, if predictable, dresser, and an avid networker and client-stroker. His suits and his affability make him seem charming, and it's supposed to show a certain class, but Howard is more unctuous than classy.

Filming of the sixth and last BCS season finished in March. Episodes have "dropped" or will soon, depending on which streaming service you use. As *Better Call Saul* passes into history, keep an eye on those cars. You might never see the likes of some of them on TV or the road again. ul lawyer an the concommittant pearl white Caddy, complete with "Lwyer Up" license plats.