

AMERICA'S STOCK MARKET

Barrett-Jackson's 45th Scottsdale sale was bigger and crazier than ever before, but its importance must never be underestimated

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THE DAY BEGINS with a joke and a warning. ‘A blonde gets pulled over for speeding...’ starts the bus driver over his PA system, on the shuttle between car park and sale room – but I won’t carry on. A minute later he reminds us all that knives over eight inches in length and all pistols are prohibited. And he gets us all to repeat after him which car park we’re in.

Then we get to the Westworld showgrounds, where I discover that adult admission to the Barrett-Jackson sale is an eye-watering \$75. This seems wrong. But it seems prudent to avoid asking out loud who would pay \$75 to watch an auction, in front of the hundreds of men, women and children streaming past, tickets in hand.

THE DAY ENDS with (another) beer, a pizza and (as it later becomes clear) a touch of tinnitus. Oh, and a happy feeling that all is not always as it seems.

AND IN BETWEEN? Well, the first impression is that this sale is huge. Ford dominates the opening area, and behind the Ford stand are yet more queues, but these are for the Barrett-Jackson merchandise stand. It’s only just turned 9am and eager shoppers are choosing T-shirts, hoodies, mugs, pens and caps emblazoned with the auction house logo. Well, you don’t see that at Bonhams, I think, feeling proud to be British.

More stands. There’s racing legend Bob Bondurant himself on the Bondurant School of High Performance Driving stand. But where the hell is the actual auction?

More stands. A glance at the first ever Camaro, recently restored, gracing the Chevrolet stand. No! Concentrate. I know that the auction should be easy to find, because I’ve seen it on TV, and it looks a decent size.

Next hall. I’m hit by a wall of baffling sound, a high-volume sing-song of numbers and words all rolled into one. The auction! But first to negotiate the automobilia stands, the queue for the toilets, the drinks vendors. And then, round the corner, the first sight of the sale. My goodness it’s massive! And the noise is overwhelming!

At closer quarters the auctioneer’s stream of sound is even more baffling than it was from 50 metres away. I find a seat and try to take it all in, catching perhaps 20%.

‘And thirty bibbity-bibbity-bibbity, and thirty-two, bibbity-bibbity, who’ll-give-me thirty-three, bibbity-bibbity-bibbity, aaaaand thirty-three, SOLD!’

I can feel myself leaning forward, pulled in by the energy and atmosphere. It’s so mesmerising that it takes a while before I notice the running bid displayed on the screens – the price is edging up at half the rate I’d expected. This ‘county auction’ style is simply a highly effective method of keeping up the excitement.

The cars are coming through at quite a rate, regardless. I picture a marshalling yard of classics behind the stage, yet when I leave the hall it’s not a car park I find but a festival field, under a now burning-hot sun. There are lines of food vendors, beer stalls, VIP areas, simulator rides and stands for everything from sunglasses to superyachts. There are people everywhere.

I can’t quite face it, but there’s an entrance to a marquee that looks easier to deal with. How wrong can

a man be? I seem to have entered the marquee-that-never-ends. I can tell you now (thanks to the smartness of my smartphone) that I walked more than ten miles on Barrett-Jackson day, and a fair bit of that must have been among the stands in the marquee-that-never-ends, looking in disbelief at everything from sparkly cowboy boots and paintings of semi-naked women to custom suspension installations and fishing boats.

The marquee-that-never-ends turns out to have ends after all: the one nearest the saleroom is the ‘Salon’ area, for the most important cars, such as 1930s coachbuilts (including a Mercedes-Benz 540K, a Delahaye and two Talbot-Lagos), ultra-low-mileage muscle cars, plenty of top-notch customs and much, much more.

The other end, a long way from the saleroom, is for the cars just one notch down from the Salon entries, from a splitscreen VW bus to slingshot dragsters. From here, doors lead to an outside area of still more sale cars, these less glitzy and even more eclectic. The first I spot are a Goggomobile and an International Scout utility vehicle.

I follow the sound of revving engines and screeching tyres, to see a driving demo arena; next to that are lines of long open-side marquees that house the rest of the sale cars. Hundreds of them. I have never, ever, seen anything like this. It’s time to find out how it works.

THE NUMBERS are phenomenal. By the end of the eight days, 1469 cars have been across the block, selling for more than \$102 million, and more than 1400 pieces of automobilia have sold for over \$3 million, making a total of more than \$105 million, \$3.4 million of which is donated to charity. Of the 1469 vehicles sold, only 20 had a reserve price – no-reserve sales are a Barrett-Jackson trademark. What’s more, 350,000 visitors have attended and many, many more across the world will have seen the sales on live TV, via the Discovery Channel.

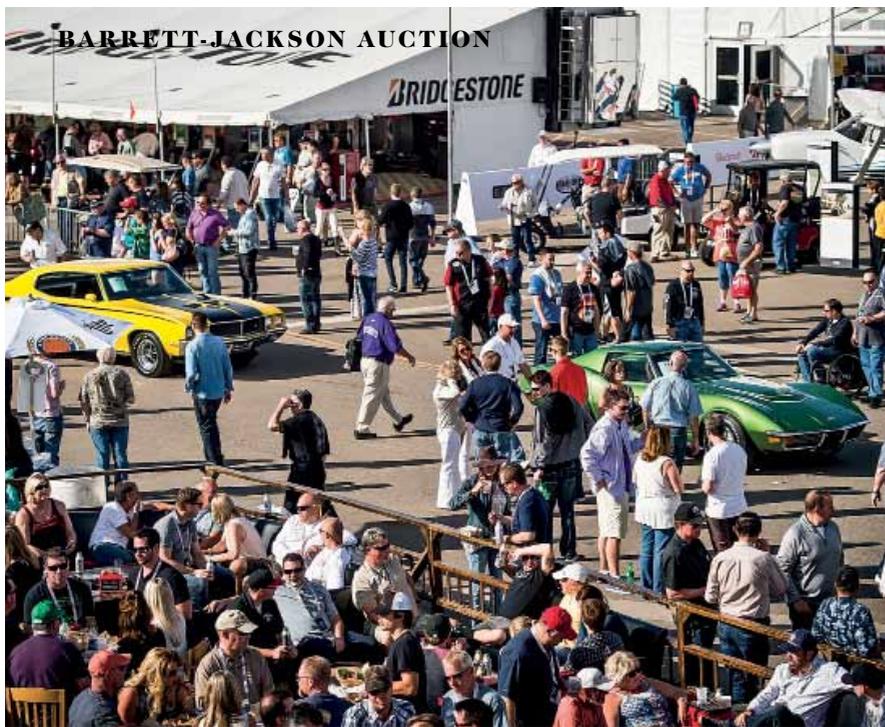
When the most high-profile vehicles are going under the hammer – including the *Transformers* ‘Optimus Prime’ Peterbilt stunt truck and ‘Bumblebee’ Camaro (accompanied by director Michael Bay), the *Smokey and the Bandit* Firebird (with Burt Reynolds!), and a Porsche 918 – it’s reckoned that over 9000 people squeeze into the sales arena, and they cheer and whoop as prices go high.

The atmosphere is electric, the pace relentless, with the car for sale rolled to the side of the stage while it’s still being bid on to make way for the next one. The auctioneer barely seems to take a breath between shouting ‘Sold!’ then ‘And here’s the...’ as the next sale gets underway. There’s one sold every three minutes on average, but →

‘AT CLOSER QUARTERS THE AUCTIONEER’S STREAM OF SOUND IS EVEN MORE BAFFLING THAN IT WAS FROM 50 METRES AWAY’

Right
The sheer scale of the event is vast, the white tents housing hundreds of sale cars, comprised of a wild mix of muscle cars, customs, supercars, Europeans and the just plain oddball.





Clockwise from left
 A team of 60 employees drive the sale cars into the auction room; Meguiar's tent; so much food!; American muscle dominates; early Camaro; Discovery Channel TV monitors; Salon collection.



many are much faster than that – the average is skewed by the song and dance of the most important cars.

I somehow manage to inveigle myself onto the stage, and then up onto the podium, standing right behind the auctioneers under the glare of the TV lights, gazing out at the huge crowd. It's early evening on Saturday, prime Barrett-Jackson time, and (if you'll forgive the cliché) the energy feels like a physical presence, an assault on every sense as the auctioneer blasts through his routine, the crowd roars, photographers and cameramen run back and forth and auctioneers' assistants relay bids and enthusiastically encourage bidders to keep on bidding.

There are four of us squeezed into the podium. The screens in front of us are split into windows that show the details of the car, a picture of the owner and a corresponding live camera feed focused on that owner to make sure he's not bidding on his own car. The current price achieved is displayed between the price the owner is hoping for and the price that the Barrett-Jackson team expects to achieve. Generally it seems that the sale price falls between the two, but it's clear that the auctioneer works hard for the best he can achieve.

Another screen shows the current bidders, the camera zooming in on each one to pick up the numbers on their lanyards. This enables the team to check that bidders are genuine and that their pre-agreed credit corresponds with the level they're bidding to. An aside: sellers are granted credit to the level of the estimate on their cars, and around 40% buy another car at the sale. Forty percent!

The number of phone bidders and internet bidders is displayed too, and all the while a bank of operators to one side of the podium monitor those bids and relay them to the auctioneer. Most of the bidders are in the front central section of the arena, but some are right at the back in the Muscle Lounge, where assistants are followed by cameras as they watch for bids back there. All the while, the auctioneer pauses only if the bidding stalls, to remind the crowd of the car's credentials. It's like watching someone rub their stomach and pat their head at high speed in the middle of a tornado.

Craig Jackson, chairman and CEO since 1995, joins us on the podium and I ask if he's seeing any new trends. 'Well the '80s cars are on the up, but some of *these* [he gestures to a pretty pre-war Ford being pushed across the stage in front of us] aren't selling for as much as they used to.' And then he's off again, and I follow suit.

I stagger outside, head spinning, to find myself in the middle of a party vibe. It's dark and the temperature is dropping, but there's no sign of the throng subsiding. Indeed, they're getting louder, drinking beer served by an army of cleavage-wielding bar staff in tight Gas Monkey Garage vest-tops. A band strikes up, and I follow the sound to another hall, hitherto undiscovered, where a rodeo show is finishing just as the band launches into a series of crowd-pleasing cover versions.

It's 9pm and there's plenty of life left here yet. I've drunk beer, eaten burgers, bought unnecessary tat, seen hundreds of cars, met lots of great people and had my eyes opened to a fascinating and entertaining sector of the classic-car world. What a fantastic day. **End**