



Oakland cars gone wild

Are auto sideshows a harmless release or a threat to residents?

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OAKLAND, CALIF.— This is the sideshow capital of America.

Sideshows are dangerous and illegal automobile performances — and the thrill is what puts people behind the wheel and on the sidelines.

Sideshows usually start the same way, most often in the middle of the night: Long caravans of cars are connected by cell phones and attitude. When drivers reach a location they like, they take it — and the traffic — over.

What follows is an exhibition of urban street-driving and doing what are called “donuts.” With music in the background, audiences watch screeching tires and burning rubber. The crowd passes judgment on good or bad execution. Sometimes crowds get too close, and sometimes people get into accidents.

Police say that if you take that gathering, add a raucous crowd, and mix in some drugs and alcohol, you have a sideshow.

On a Saturday night in Oakland, a sideshow is never very far away.

Police try and keep them from happening through traffic stops. But make no mistake, there is a war going on: On one side, police say what starts with a sideshow often ends with more serious criminal activity. On the other side are the drivers and crowds who cheer them on because they love the show.

Yakpasua Zazaboi, 27, known as Yap to his friends, is the sideshow equivalent of Mario Andretti. He’s also the self-described voice and videographer of sideshows. His documentary called “Sydewayz” started as a school project but has become something of a video cult classic among sideshow fans who like to watch the events even when they can’t be there personally.

"There are never going to stop this because there is nothing like this in America," says Zazaboi. "There are no fights or no gun shots. People bring their kids out. That is what sideshows used to be about — having fun."

The success of Yap’s documentary has inspired a number of imitators. There is an entire subculture of video voyeurs capturing the action, adding a little hard core pornography and selling it all over the Internet with titles like “Oakland Gone Wild.”

"Increasingly chaotic"

Sideshows have been going on for 20 years and have always been illegal, but now there's a new twist: These days they’ve become increasingly chaotic. Police blame this on people spilling out of clubs in the wee hours of the morning, many of them high on ecstasy or other drugs, or just drunk. Zazaboi says this has changed the scene, and that there is more wild behavior both in and out the

cars.

Things can go wrong — quickly — as they did one night we were there, when a crowd attacked a car after it mistakenly wandered into a sideshow.

"A couple of years ago, that would have never happened because there would have been a lot of older folks that would have warned off these kids, pulled them back, and told them, 'That's not cool, that's not how we get down out here,'" argues Zazaboi.

But these days the sideshow crowds are more likely to do something rash or dangerous. And Yap says that is largely the city of Oakland's fault.

A release or a nuisance?

"The thing with the sideshows is that it also provides a release for people in the community," argues Zazaboi. "If you go to East Oakland right now, there is nothing for the citizens of that area to do. There used to be a bowling alley and a skating rink. All that is gone. The only thing left are liquor stores, bars, and gas stations."

"That is garbage," argues Lt. Dave Kozicki of the Oakland police. "This is a serious problem. There are people who think that somehow, this city has an obligation to provide them with a venue to behave recklessly and engage in criminal behavior."

For people living in the midst of this, it adds up to a loud noisy problem.

Sideshows infuriate 83-year old Oakland resident Gladys Green. The smoke of burning cars tires fill her home and she is routinely awakened by the crowds and the sound of drivers doing "donuts."

"Why do we have to live where we cant even sleep at night? It's just not fair," says Green. "When you get to a certain age... you want to relax and be comfortable in your own home and you can't because these youngsters are doing something that they're not supposed to be doing. Why should we have to put up with that?"

Yap admits sideshows are getting rowdier, but he says police and reporters overstate that problem.

But Lt. Kozicki says that while no one's been killed doing a "donut," people have been killed in accidents fleeing sideshows — and he says there's plenty of violence generated by the crowd itself. "Just this year alone, we've had three of our homicides in the city of Oakland directly attributed to sideshow activity," he says,

The best evidence, says Kozicki, are in the videotapes sideshow participants make and sell. "I tell you, I could not put together a better case against sideshows than what these people are producing themselves," he says.

Oakland fights back

When "Dateline" rode with police one night, there were only 29 police officers on duty to serve and protect all of Oakland's 400,000 citizens who are spread out across a 56 square mile area.

And sideshow crowds have started fighting back. "The problem is that when we send one or two police cars into these frays, they are often greeted with rocks and bottles," says Kozicki. "Two to three police cars aren't enough to solve them once they get a foothold."

No one knows this better than Oakland police officer Brad Young. Young narrowly escaped serious injury and his squad car was destroyed when someone at a sideshow turned a car into a missile by

jamming a brick onto the accelerator and sending it toward police.

"I saw a car coming right at me at a high speed. It was black out, and was just coming at me," says Young. "It is scary, and anyone who tells you differently is lying."

Young says the folks out there aren't teenagers living some modern-day American Graffiti fantasy: Most can barely see their teenage years in the rear view mirror.

"It's not just your nice eagle scouts that are doing the driving," says Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown. "A lot of these people are felons, as they get crazed with their drugs. So it is a danger."

Brown is working on a proposal to permanently confiscate cars involved in sideshows as well as bringing felony charges against those involved — which would mean jail time. Spectators could also be fined. The Oakland City Council is expected to vote on that measure later this month.

"We need more cops, and we need more prosecution," says Brown. "We need a curfew, so that once they are convicted, they don't come back in Oakland."

And the Oakland police will continue to respond with as much force as they can muster.

"We are aggressive, and we use aggressive and effective tactics," says Kozicki.

The mayor promises that soon the city will be in the driver's seat. But Brown is not the first mayor to try to bring to sideshows to an end... and Yap says he won't be the last.

"As long as the people of Oakland are in Oakland, sideshows will exist," says Zazaboi.

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