

SIXTIES SWINGER

A car that looked like it had arrived from space – but there was a serious vision behind it

“Can you call after my meditation class?” This is David Gittens, photographer, designer, musician, creative facilitator and wedding celebrant, speaking from Florida. His website is an extraordinary concatenation of furniture design, musical healing, autogyros, community arts, catamarans and spiritual concerns. So what’s

the connection between a man who designed a minimal scooter/bike for clean city transport and a rumbling V8 supercar built on a McLaren chassis?

“That was just one of our car concepts,” says Gittens of the amazing knee-high Ikenga that wowed the press in the late Sixties. “We planned an electric city car, a six-wheeler that expanded from two to four seats, a modular vehicle based on the Bond Bug and a single-seat city module with a Fiat 500 engine. It looked a bit like a Dalek!”

These plans collapsed in 1969 when Gitten’s intended partner, Charlie Williams of well-known body builder Williams & Pritchard, had a fatal heart attack on the very day a vital contract arrived. “We had to salvage what we could, and the GT was furthest along.”

In fact the Ikenga GT first hit the roads of swinging London in 1967 when Gittens switched track from cameras to cars. Trained as a designer and photographer in New York and Los Angeles, he at first covered sports car racing for Car & Driver and Sports Cars Illustrated – “life-changing for this young Brooklyn lad, and a massive door-opener for a young man from my culture”.

In 1964 he moved to London to marry, and set up a photo studio. Working in fashion and advertising was glamorous but the car itch was constant. “I had a TVR Griffith; that was horrendous. The chassis broke accelerating up Haverstock Hill. Then I bought an Aston DB4GT. That was magnificent. I used to race a friend to Monaco in his Iso Rivolta but at 150 I could only hold him for a few minutes before the oil overheated. With its 52-gallon tank it was great for touring – I went all around Italy in it.”

Still the designer’s pen yearned for expression. His assistant John Quinn recalls, “He was always sketching cars. He had a full-size drawing of the Ikenga on the back wall of the studio which he would constantly modify.”

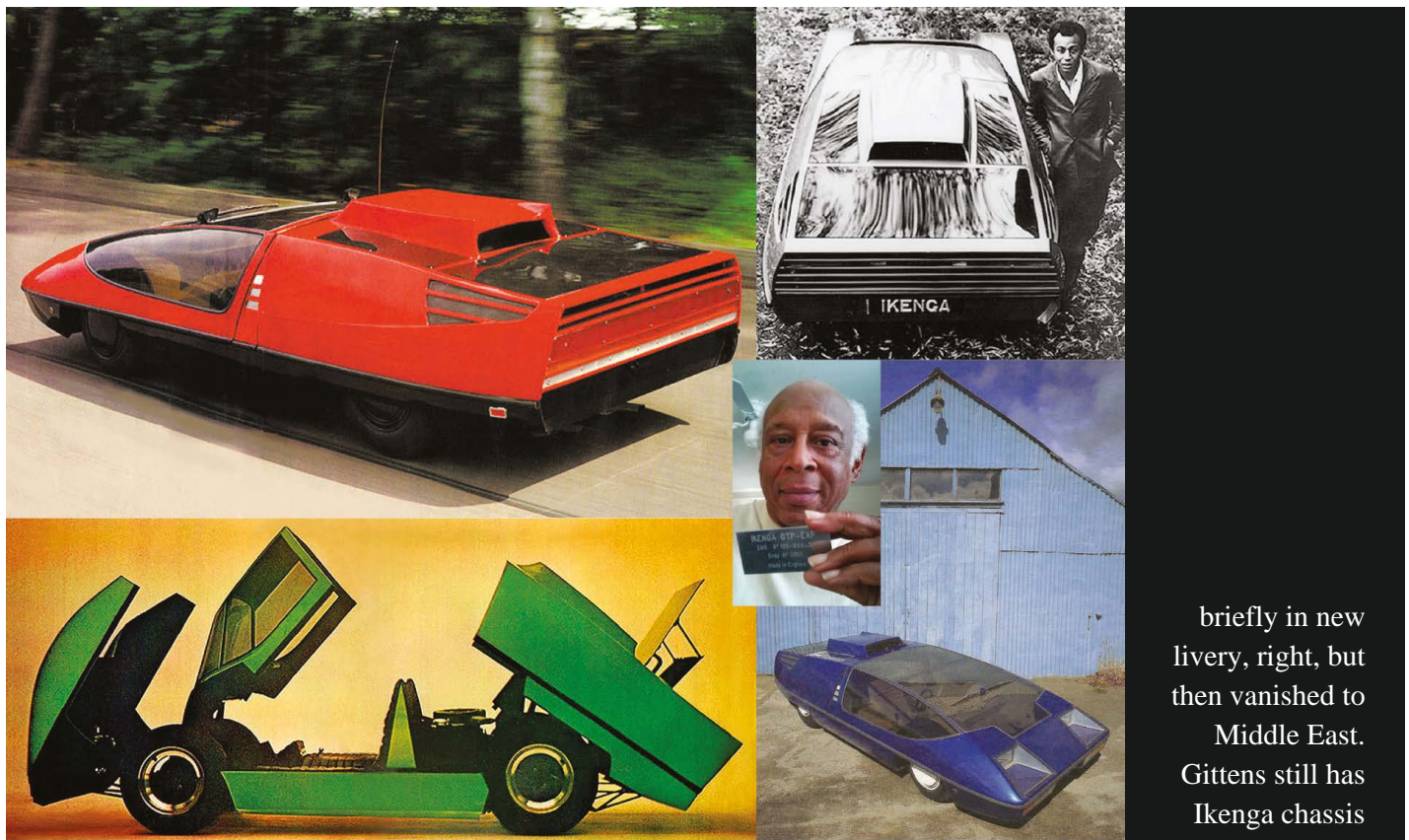
Then David got moving. “I met Charlie Williams and bought a McLaren MkI chassis from Ken Sheppard, without the Traco Oldsmobile that was in it. I wanted to create a studio to service the British auto industry, to do what the Italians did, where craftsmen would execute ideas without theorising. Charlie would have been instrumental – he was a master craftsman, and became like a godfather to me. He transmuted my clay models to rolled aluminium.”

With a cooking Buick V8 installed instead of a race engine, the experimental two-seater took on the first of three incarnations. In Nigerian Ibo culture, where David traces his roots, Ikenga is a figure or mask symbolising creative life force and as he points out, from above the MkI is a mask on wheels – the canopy for eyes, a raised intake of a nose and the luggage lid (doubling as an air brake!) a mouth. Inside, a square-oval wheel lifted up for access, while occupants lay back on a contoured double seat. Quinn was tasked with finding novel parts, “like free Cibie lights, the reflective paint and a rotary windscreen wiper.”

“It was a research vehicle,” says Gittens, “so it was full of advanced technology.” Groovy reflective lime-green paint made it stand out like a neon sign, while to cover its blind rear view there was a Pye TV camera, common today but ahead of its time. “We were dependent on the technology of the era; if you went from dark to sunlight it would blow the tube. You’ll see there’s a mirror on top in some photos...”

The next year, 1968, Gittens restyled the car, giving it a plush leather interior, and then altered it again to a much more elegant wedge profile, as fashionable as flares at the time. This gained a lot of coverage. Gittens featured in the Sunday Telegraph as a hot ‘British’ designer alongside Dennis Adams and Tom Karen of Ogle, while US magazine Ebony pictured him in his London studio surrounded by plans for cars, autogyros, and modular housing, seated at a transparent plastic desk he was preparing to manufacture. “He has an aura about him,” says Quinn, “a real sense of style. He had bookshelves and a Charles Eames chair in the back of his van to relax in!”

Wide-open MkI, above, shows bootlid/airbrake. Top right, Ikenga in MkII form with designer Gittens. Profile was updated in 1969, top, on the same McLaren chassis. MkIII resurfaced



briefly in new livery, right, but then vanished to Middle East. Gittens still has Ikenga chassis

Each update added more tech to the Ikenga. “London was alive, full of young guys keen to try new ideas,” Gittens says. “Imperial College developed the TV, luminescent roof lining instead of interior lights, fluorescent tubes for headlamps and a radio system for advance warning of road problems.” Yes – telematics, the road/car data exchange manufacturers are currently developing, back when The Saint was still on TV. Even more forward-looking, Ikenga had collision warning and ultrasonic parking sensors. Some science fiction becomes fact.

Access to the 39in-high machine wasn’t easy with the huge lift-up canopy and wide sills, but Gittens says, “It was comfortable inside and since it only weighed 1800lb it went like a scalded cat. We tested it at Brands Hatch but I didn’t want to risk it on the street – it was a business venture, not just for fun.” Media attention for the space-age roadster was sky-high, but to David’s irritation the Earls Court Motor Show wouldn’t give space to concepts. Our own DSJ was equally affronted. Applauding the Ikenga as “bristling with interesting features”, he continued, “If Bertone or Farina had designed and built it people would have drooled over it. Because it was designed in London by Gittens and built by Williams and Pritchard a lot of people could not be bothered to look at it, but it was their loss, not the Ikenga’s.”

Instead the machine, with fitted Gucci luggage, went on display at Harrods and

starred on TV future-fest Tomorrow's World. But the attention was tempered by Charlie Williams' sudden death during the MkIII build, ending the dream of the new enterprise. Knocked back by losing his fellow spirit but determined to keep something afloat, Gittins took the half-completed car to another London coachbuilder, Radfords. "Bill Lundt-Smith, the director, wanted to build limited editions," recalls Gittins, "so it made sense."

No relation to Charlie, Gary Williams was involved with the MkIII at both firms. "I worked on it at W&P in Edmonton," he remembers, "and when David took it to Radfords at Chiswick I went down to finish the bodywork. It had a ¾in steel frame with aluminium sheet shaped to form the outer skin. The interior and paintwork were done at Radfords too." Fellow car builder Roger Nathan helped complete the car and get it running, although it was a panic to get it ready for its October 1969 TV debut.

"When we got to Shepherd's Bush the car wouldn't start," says Gary Williams, "so we had to push it onto the set. Very embarrassing!" From there David trailered the car to Paris where he drove it in the traffic for the cameras, then on for the Turin motor show where it received an innovation award. On the way back he stopped at that artistic magnet St Paul de Vence. "I was friendly with the owners of Le Colombe d'Or and it stayed in their garage for a while but people kept wanting to see it drive. And it was flown to Stockholm where we had a motorcycle escort from the airport!"

And where is it now? Gittens doesn't know. After a stint in the Manx Motor Museum it popped up at an auction in 1998, and in 2008 was sold again to the Middle East. Is it still there, or has the chassis been re-McLarened? That would make it a valuable property, but a quirky spark of Anglo-American creativity would have been lost.

Gittens subsequently had new inspiration from meeting autogyro ace Ken Wallis, who famously stood in for Sean Connery flying the rocket-firing gunship in *You Only Live Twice*, and David went on to design several autogyros, one of them displayed in the Smithsonian. There was even a wearable body-suit personal transport device: "We took a mould off the pilot, made a shell and fitted the components to that." Just one of a stream of creative effusions from David's active mind, including a floating 'yogi nest' airship for cruising the USA and a fountain of design concepts, performance art, workshops and exhibitions. Now 77, he is

immersed in the sounds of his 23-string guitar designs, explaining, “I’m interested in music as a vehicle for wellness and healing”.

David Gittens is a million miles away from the mainstream automotive world – but wouldn’t life be dull without a few free-thinkers content to ignore life’s norms?
