

# Swing Low, Swede Chariots

A Brit abroad breaks his Power Big Meet cherry and samples the biggest show on earth.

Words: Karl Baumann Photography: Maria L. Geo



Where is the biggest American Car show on the planet? Texas? LA? Arizona, perhaps? It might surprise you to learn it's in Sweden, in a small town about an hour's drive from Stockholm called Västerås.

Not only is it the biggest American car show in the world, it's the largest car show full stop! This year was the 39th Power Big Meet (the Big Meet organised by Sweden's Power Magazine) and it set new records on Friday, July 8th with over 10,000 cars on display. But Power Big Meet is about far more than a lot of classics parked on an airfield; it's about the atmosphere and attitude this gathering engenders

as the show takes over the little town with a huge parade and then the burnout event on a leisure park.

We in Blighty could learn a lot from our Swedish friends. I've attended car shows since I was a child but I challenge you not to be impressed with the massive scale of this gigantic gathering. The event starts on a Thursday and that's the best day for buying the classic El Camino, Cadillac or Charger you always dreamed about, but there were still plenty of cars for sale on the Friday morning when I arrived. Also, lots of cars were being advertised with hand made posters on various concessions set up around the

infield where the majority of the cars were parked.

"It's an amazing event," says Andy Inglis, a Brit who happened to be the first person I got talking to. "I've come every year since 1999 and witnessed the growth first hand. Most of the years I drove all the way but I flew this year and I'm borrowing a Chevy from a friend for the cruise later."

I've always found it easy to chat with people at shows in the UK and it's the same in Västerås. There is plenty of English being spoken between people who aren't from the UK as they explain to the master of ceremonies at the main arena about their drive from the other side of Sweden, Austria, Belgium, even as far as Italy! There is a conversation in English about a specific car driven into the small arena and then a Swedish rough translation and overview of what was said. Alessandro Facchin and his partner Nadia received an award for driving his Camaro all the way from Udine, in northern Italy. Nadia strived to translate between the MC's English and then Alessandro's answers - it wasn't easy for her but the crowd in the arena were very supportive of her efforts and it's easy to see why they got a trophy - 5,000km is a long way to drive in any car. Of course, it's nice to see an American at the show. Al Young →



also collected an award for his exploits cruising around Europe in his Road Runner, and you couldn't hope to meet a nicer guy.

I even bumped into a friend. Mike Holyoake is from Surrey, the proud owner of a 1957 Thunderbird worked on by Ed China and purchased from Mike Brewer on Wheeler Dealers, so the eagle-eyed amongst you might recognise him. Mike is a Västerås virgin like me. "Isn't this wonderful?" he said. "I have never seen so many amazing cars in one place. Yesterday I struggled to take a look at three-quarters of the cars on display. I'm crashing with my buddy, Glen, but next year I want to bring my Charger and be part of it all."

Mike's buddy Glen is another great guy. He's deep into the Rockabilly scene and has a green 1963 Ford Ranchero he calls Poison Ivy back in Hampshire. Glen has been to the Meet before and introduces me to Swedish A&E doctor Kim Knapman. Kim qualified as a doctor in Hull and speaks better English than I do, and has a wonderful relaxing aura about her as she proudly explains her sexy outfit. "I wear it because so many people dress

up for Power Meet, it fits with me being a doctor, of course, and I will drive my ambulance in the parade." Kim explains that a friend in San Francisco looked over this 1959 Buick National Combination and then helped her ship it over to Sweden. "It's not a Buick Flixible, which was far more common." I nodded like I knew the difference but who cares, it's a great example of the spirit of the Meet.

Lady owners of American classics are rare in my experience, but 'sisters doin' it for themselves' was an eye opener for me in Sweden. I saw several Fifties chrome monsters being easily handled by women drivers. I assume the men sitting shotgun were the owners and had enjoyed a few beers, therefore delegating the wife to drive (*be careful what you assume!* - DS) but when you see an Olds 4-4-2 convertible with three women enjoying the glorious weather you assume the driver is the owner, right?

The next big difference with UK shows is the "Raggar" cars. I've seen plenty of rat rods in my time but a Raggar car seems to be an American car that looks as unloved and beaten up as



a rat rod but without the muscle under the hood or too many modifications. In short, if it looks mean and beaten up but isn't built for speed it's Raggar. If these cars were people, they'd be the Goths who dressed mostly in black at sixth form college.

Kimmo Hotti and his girlfriend Jenni Rajakallio are the proud owners of a Raggar police car. Their Plymouth Grand Fury was completely stock before it was then given a 'second life' when Kimmo decided he wanted a weekend car that would turn more heads. Kimmo and Jen made the trip from neighbouring Finland as did Sari Grondahl - there seemed to be a lot of vehicles sporting little Finnish flags at the show, Sari's 1968 Plymouth GTX was no exception. But what was eye catching about Sari's GTX was the bright pink (Panther Pink?) colour. "It was painted in 1992", Sari tells me. "I bought it in 1997... but take a look at the number plate, FMA 1. That means Finnish Mopar Association number 1." Perhaps there are more female owners than I originally thought! "And this GTX is a Hemi." OTT colour but impressive nonetheless. "Will

you be doing burnouts with this after the parade?" I asked. "No, the parade is too slow, too restrictive, and getting this back to Helsinki if I blow out a tyre would be a nightmare."

Next I see a semi-naked bearded Swede called Martin. With his long beard and glasses he could be from a ZZ Top tribute band but he is holding a sign he has made from cardboard. "I'm trying to get a special carburettor for my Impala. I have been to all the stalls but nobody has it so I'm hoping someone can help me." "Why is the sign in English?" I ask. "It doesn't matter, many people here will understand." "Good luck, Martin."

By about 2pm you notice more classics leaving than arriving, and by 2:45pm or so there's a big jam. You see a 1970 Challenger behind a Mustang Mach 1, behind a pair of '57 Chevys who themselves are behind an Oldsmobile 88, then a 1960 Caddy and so on, quite possibly the most impressive traffic jam you will ever see in your life.

I dived into my Japanese rental car feeling embarrassed to be driving something so bland and nondescript when there's so much character and →

chrome all around me. I followed the crowd towards the town and then parked up at a lake on what is obviously the route of the parade. By this time the locals (and those who were at the airfield to view these fabulous cars, like me) have set up deckchairs and beer coolers as they take in the splendid scene unfolding. Cruising along this drab road are thousands of pristine US classics of every era. Most cars have passengers who return the envious looks of the kerb side crowds with gentle waves. Some passengers even opt for sitting in the boot of the cars. But it has to be said, the crowds still appreciate the Raggare just as much.

After a few hours of this glorious procession I drove to a retail park in the Halle district of Västerås, again following the crowd, not knowing where I'm going or what I'm going to be in for. Parking is a huge issue but I get lucky and then spectate at the end of two

parallel makeshift concrete barriers. The crowd is already cheering as cars and bikes take it in turns to punish their back tyres. As the revs increase the crowd clearly appreciate it and clouds of white smoke steadily waft up around each vehicle. Pretty soon the tarmac in this burnout zone is covered in tiny pieces of rubber and the air is thick with the acrid smell. My T-shirt stinks of it but I don't care, especially when Mike joins me again. "Imagine our Police tolerating this? Never."

I get talking to a young Swede of about 20, Robin. "I'm from Västerås ... yes the police are ok with this because of the show, but not normally." "Apparently 100,000 Swedes have American cars, why is that?" I enquired. "It's always been like that, since the Fifties. It was always best to have the big chromed car like Elvis and be really Rock'n'Roll and people didn't stop bringing them over." Sweden was

neutral in WWII, so while the rest of Europe was being rebuilt, Swedes had money for more than Volvos if they felt the need, and clearly many did.

The Saturday started as gloriously as Friday had finished, both weather-wise and in terms of the car displays. I assumed there would be some kind of crescendo to mark the end of this three-day jaunt at the retail park so I was even more excited, but about lunchtime the heavens opened and torrential rain came down for a long period. The parade route was deserted by onlookers and the event was washed away.

That was it really, proof that any car show is always at the mercy of the weather, but we Brits know all about that! After being denied the end of the show it just makes me want to return for the 40th show in 2017 even more. Perhaps next year I'll bump into Magnus from Fast'n'Loud? **ACM**

