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## **D.C. COMICS LICENSES FAN TO BUILD BATMOBILES**

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*Indiana–Logansport man is licensed by D.C. Comics to build exact replicas of the 1966 TV Show Batmobile*

On January 12th, 1966, the original Batman television series that featured Adam West as Batman and Burt Ward as Robin hit the television screens. A year after, a two-year-old Mark Racop vowed that he would someday build the Batmobile on the TV screen before him. Fifteen years later, Racop built his first Batmobile replica, and now he builds 1966 Batmobile replicas for a living. These aren't model kits, or radio controlled cars—no. Racop's replicas are full-scale, *driveable* cars that have sold all over the world. And D.C. Comics recently authorized Racop to build these 1966 Batmobile replicas as officially licensed collectibles.

The news instantly went viral. Fiberglass Freaks found itself featured on over 300 websites and blogs, including Gizmodo.com, Neatorama.com, Boingboing.com, YahooNews.com, carmiddleeast.com, the Wall Street Journal, and in magazines and newspapers all over the world, like Spiegel, Dupont Registry, Telegraph, FHM, Octane, Firebox, and Gasoline Alley. It didn't take long for radio and TV to catch up: Hollywood Treasures, How Do They Do That?, various news stations, Indianapolis Business, and even the nationally syndicated "Bob and Tom" radio show have featured Fiberglass Freaks on their shows.

The orders continue to flood in as well. Racop had already sold 16 cars before the licensing deal, and he says that he has started receiving orders for several "officially licensed" cars.

"Who would have thought that this would become a full-time career?" Racop muses. "I am a huge fan of the original Batman television series. I fell in love the show, fell in love with the action, the color, the music—*everything*—but the best feature was seeing the Batmobile, speeding out of the Batcave. I will never forget that iconic moment."

Fifteen years later, Racop and several friends built their first Batmobile replica from a 1974 Monte Carlo in Racop's father's garage.

"That was testing ground," Racop said. "While not actually a prototype, it allowed us to work out a lot of the bugs." Racop says that his occupation is more than just a job, it's a *mission*. "I've been studying this car since I was two-years-old. My father videotaped all 120 episodes for me to study, frame by frame. I have over 34,000 photos great video of the Barris cars in my archives, totaling 115 Gigabytes of data. Yeah, you could say that I'm a little obsessed!" Racop says, laughing.

That obsession, however, is what ultimately led D.C. Comics to give a license to Racop to make these 1966 Batmobile replica cars and replica parts as official collectibles. “D.C. sent a spy to my shop to check us out! He must have liked what he saw, because shortly afterward, the licensing offer came through.”

The idea of selling Batmobile replicas has percolated for quite some time for Racop. He made it happen in the fall of 2004, thanks to a \$40,000 loan from his father and lots of help from his collaborator/friend Jeff Sandberg. As with any new business, it was not without its challenges, but the greatest challenge was finding a 1966 Batmobile car body.

The original Batmobile was built from a 1955 Lincoln Futura show car that *never* went into production. There was only one, and it was converted into the Batmobile in 1965 by famed auto Kustomizer George Barris. Without any other Futuras, Racop considered hand sculpting the entire car from urethane foam, but then lightning struck.

“You know how they say you can find *anything* on Ebay?” Racop laughs, “They aren’t kidding.” Racop was able to locate and purchase a replica sculpture of the Futura on Ebay, from which he created molds.

“Famed car sculptor Marty Martino was a huge fan of the 1955 Lincoln Futura, and he was absolutely horrified to see what George Barris had done with ‘his’ beautiful car. He got in touch with Ford, who sent him all kinds of photos and drawings to help him make his sculpture. After a complete restoration of Marty’s work, we made our own Futura mold and made a fiberglass Futura car body,” Racop said. “It was pretty cool to convert *our* fiberglass Futura replica body into a Batmobile just like George Barris did to the original metal Futura body in 1965.”

Racop said he took that Batmobile replica—Bat 2—to an auction, and things just exploded from there. “I sold four cars in two weeks,” Racop said. Racop and his crew work out of a top secret 8,300 square foot “Batcave” in Logansport, Indiana. A year later, he bought the building next door to expand his operations.

Racop’s team works around the clock. He says, “A third are full-time, and the rest work on an as-needed basis. Some start as early as 6AM, others come in after 10PM.” Racop says it takes about six months to build each car. They produce Batmobile replicas to order. “Our license agreement from D.C. Comics limits us to selling only eight cars per year,” Racop said.

“Quality is the driving force behind our success,” Racop says, “We are constantly pushing the envelope on quality, features, and accuracy.” Racop says he spent \$250,000 last year retooling to make sure he was producing the best product that he could.

“While these are still glorified kit cars, we do a lot to get away from the typical kit car issues,” Racop said. “We use factory hinges, one piece doors, steel wheel well tubs, rocker panels that connect with the original Lincoln floor pans, thick fiberglass bodies, and lots of steel square tubing.”

Racop's Batmobile replicas begin life as mid-70's Lincoln Town Cars. They keep only the chassis, engine, transmission, and the floor pan. They form the fiberglass bodies from their own molds.

Fiberglass Freaks manufactures 90% of the car in-house, although they out-source some of the decorative metal pieces.

"We use water and laser jet cutters and machine shops to speed up production, increase quality, and make things in a more cost-effective manner. But even the parts we have custom-made have to be modified," Racop said. "You can't just walk into your local NAPA and buy a 1966 Batmobile steering wheel. We have to prep, weld, grind, wire, prime, and paint the wheel, and then do final assembly of the 40 parts. Everything takes time. Our roll top dashboard doors take two weeks to complete *after* the parts come back from the machine shop!"

Each car is loaded with special bat gadgets, one of which is a rocket exhaust tube that shoots a two foot flame out the back of the vehicle.

"We put a propane tank in the trunk and operate the flamethrower from hidden switches under the dash. We live in a tactile world. Everything has to do something. Whether you're working the headlights, the red flashing beacon light, or the DVD player in the dashboard, every button, knob, or switch has *some* kind of function."

In addition to the flamethrower, the cars feature electric actuators for the hood and trunk, a green flashing radar screen called the Detect-a-scope, and a gold antenna grid called the Batbeam. "The Batbeam," Racop explained, "is that gold flyswatter thing between the front windshields. It raises and lowers on an automatic antenna. On the show, the Batbeam could cut through 18 inches of steel and 3 feet of concrete. Ours raises and lowers to the oos and ahhs of fans."

"Most of our customers are in their 40's or 50's," Racop said. "The kids are out of the house, they have come into some money, and it's time to do something fun. They either like Batman, or just loved the Batmobile. Either way, every guy between the ages of 40 and 60 would *love* to have this car, and women love it, too."

"Our customers are very eccentric," Racop adds. "Wealth seems to breed that eccentricity. This was their childhood *dream* car, just as it was for me. Who knows what they are going to use it for? Some want a Batmobile to show off while picking up their kids from school. Others use them for charity events. Some have private museums, and others just want to drive it."

The market grows daily as the Batman television show continues in syndication around the world. "Batman was recently introduced to Hong Kong again, said Racop, "and a whole new generation are watching it for the very first time. Shortly after that, I received a call from a potential customer wanting to buy a souped-up version of the car."

"While there is a fan base for the 1989 Batmobile (the Michael Keaton Batmobile), the 1966 Batmobile transcends race, gender, and even age. Kids that have never seen the original Batman

TV series seem to *get* this version of the car, and they accept it like they know it.”

The 1966 Batmobile has always been special to Racop, but it is also special for his marriage. He met his wife Jill because of the car. The two of them were sitting in his first Batmobile replica at a root beer stand when Racop uttered, “Jill, I think I’m falling in like with you.” It worked. The Racops have enjoyed twenty-three years of marriage. “What can I say?” Racop quips, “Women dig the car!”

“We’ve been very blessed with a very talented and dedicated crew, and to receive this license from DC Comics is an absolute honor. We’ve done everything we can to make it the best, but the research and development never stop. It’s good enough for DC Comics, but it still isn’t good enough for me!” Racop laughs.

Racop’s 1966 Batmobile replicas cost \$150,000. Each car takes 1000 hours of labor, and Racop says the demand for his cars requires that he always has three or four in construction.

To learn more about Fiberlgass Freaks, go to their website at [www.fiberglassfreaks.com](http://www.fiberglassfreaks.com), or call their shop at 574-722-3237. To watch the video of two Batmobiles on the highway, go to: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDu-ALGaEjM>

For more information about the 1966 Batmobile, visit Eric Seltzer’s fantastic website: [www.1966batmobile.com](http://www.1966batmobile.com).

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