

# Tuner Cars Invade CHICAGO & DETROIT AUTO SHOWS

UNTIL RECENTLY, ORIGINAL EQUIPMENT MANUFACTURER (OEM) AUTO SHOWS SUCH AS THE CHICAGO AUTO SHOW AND NORTH AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL AUTO SHOW IN DETROIT HAVE EXCLUSIVELY FEATURED BONE-STOCK, RIGHT-DOWN-TO-THE-SHIFT-KNOB, ORIGINAL-EQUIPMENT NEW VEHICLES. Of course there have always been radical concepts rotating on turntables, but the parts on concept cars may never find their way onto street vehicles.

This year, a flood of tuner vehicles were found sitting right next to their factory counterparts, and auto manufacturers are encouraging the parts on these cars to find their way to the street.

A tuner vehicle is a car that's been modified with after-market accessories and performance parts. Some manufacturers hire outside tuner shops or enthusiasts to do the modifications, and others use internal resources to create a customized package.

The cars are usually identifiable by carbon-fiber hoods, shaved door handles, multiple auxiliary gauges, video monitors — everywhere, massive wheels and equally massive spoilers on the trunklid. Celebrity customizers like Funkmaster Flex have even been invited on board by manufacturers to produce special tuner vehicles.

The growing trend of manufacturers displaying tuner cars is also a way for them to get feedback from the public and media about vehicle customization. "We're looking to explore it just like any other design concept. What's the appeal? What's the reaction? Is it something we should consider producing?" says Maurice Durand, Mitsubishi Motors North America, about its Ralliart Eclipse Concept.

Mitsubishi's first-generation Eclipse was a nimble, turbocharged, all-wheel drive car that's beloved by enthusiasts for its ease of performance enhancement and sports car capabilities. But the current generation Eclipse has succumbed to the demand for a larger, easier to drive

everyday car, and the performance persona has been watered down somewhat.

To combat this loss of street cred, Mitsubishi's Ralliart Eclipse concept is the brainchild of Mitsubishi's design studio in Cypress, Calif. The Ralliart concept is what enthusiasts would have liked the Eclipse to evolve into. The concept's performance enhancements include a Mitsubishi Evolution all-wheel drive system and turbocharged four cylinder, which has been modified with HKS parts to produce 400 horsepower. The Evolution's six-speed manual transmission has been retrofitted to the rest of the drivetrain.

Hyundai's display at the Chicago Auto Show had tuner cars lined up, side-by-side, five deep to showcase modification possibilities of the Tiburon, Azera, Sonata and Tucson.

The Street Concept Tiburon, featured at the show, sported Lamborghini-style doors that flip up when opened, as well as aesthetic and performance modifications, which are topped off by a bright-red paint scheme and huge 20-inch black wheels

with chrome lips. Street Concepts, out of Huntington Beach, Calif.,

specializes in modifying cars for corporations, with Hyundai being a client.

The Azera concept was one of the classiest tuner cars on display, the olive green paint was highlighted with tasteful, barely distinguishable ghost graphics. The Azera's grille and badges were color matched to the exterior, and the car was set off by olive colored five-spoke rims with chrome lips. "Tuner" doesn't have to be synonymous with "juvenile," after all.

Tuner vehicles are an exercise in design and engineering that are proportional to the demands of customers and the after-market industry. Although most vehicles won't roll off the assembly line with 10 DVD screens, expensive pearlescent paint and two-foot tall spoilers, it's possible that customers will make these modifications themselves.

Tuner cars are representative of potential more than production options. As long as the after-market industry is striving, there's a good chance that tuner cars will be side-by-side next to their unmodified cousins at OEM auto shows, and who knows? Maybe one day a flame-inspired paint scheme will be available on the new Hyundai Santa Fe. ■

