



**To see the  
Stratos on the  
street today  
makes people  
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in disbelief**



**'No, it didn't just land here, I drove it...' Andy Saunders (middle) enlightens mystified admirers**



# ZERO

*Bertone's Stratos Zero concept car blew away the design world in 1970. Custom builder Andy Saunders stopped at nothing to breathe life into his unique dream car and stun us all again*

## worship

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**QUESTION: WHAT** do pop star Michael Jackson, master coachbuilder Nuccio Bertone and custom car builder Andy Saunders have in common? Answer: the Stratos Zero. That's the other-worldly creation you're looking at here, but this isn't the original. It's Saunders' own version of the car that revolutionized sports car design in 1970, when it was revealed to a disbelieving crowd at the Turin Motor Show. Michael Jackson? I'll tell you about that soon.

I've collected as many books and pictures of the Stratos Zero as I have of Harley Earl's General Motors LeSabre. To me, they're the most beautiful car designs ever. It's just that one is from the Fifties and the other is from the Seventies, says Saunders. Cars don't get much more Seventies than the Stratos Zero, designed by Bertone's chief stylist Marcello Gandini around a mid-mounted Lancia Fulvia 1.6HF engine (salvaged from an accident-damaged car to maintain secrecy).

In the late Bertone's own words, the Stratos Zero 'went beyond mere questions of style to create a timeless blend of architecture, sculpture and industrial design'. Even its name suggests a new datum point, a new beginning. Car design would never be the same again.

'The Stratos Zero was arguably the last real concept car. Since then the world has only seen show cars,' says car designer, Lancia Stratos collector and Fenomenon creator Chris Hrabalek. 'It's an automotive masterpiece and the peak of Gandini's work. It influenced many cars including Gandini's own Lamborghini Countach. To see it on the street today would make people stop and stare in disbelief.' We're about to find out if that's true.

You'll soon fathom the depth of Saunders' admiration for both Fifties and Seventies design if you visit his Dorset home: its décor is divided between the >>>



I WISH THEY'D MADE THESE



1951 GENERAL MOTORS LESABRE

Stole its name from a fighter aircraft and became one of the most famous show cars in history because it was the first to be designed and displayed by a volume manufacturer. Styled by Harley Earl. Go on Andy, you've tackled the X-2000 - have a go at this one.



1970 FERRARI MODULO, BY PININFARINA

Radical twin-clamshell bodywork with a jet fighter-style sliding canopy that's easier to get into than the Stratos. Based on 550bhp, 5-litre V12-powered Ferrari 512S sports racer and displayed at the same Turin Show as the Bertone Stratos Zero.



1974 FORD COINS

Another bonkers wedge - imagine owning this instead of a Capri. Styled by Ghia and announced exactly a year after Ford took the coachbuilder over. There's a spoiler at the top of the windscreen and the three seats are accessed by a rear hatch.



Suddenly those Ferraris in the car park look a lot more ordinary

two eras. Not just the odd piece of furniture, but complete themed rooms. You'd expect no less from a man who builds his own Seventies vision on wheels.

The Stratos Zero is much smaller than you might imagine: like a two-thirds scale Lamborghini Countach. It's also quite possibly the maddest car in the world. The front windscreen hinges upwards from the edge of the roof so you can back into the two seats, with the mid-mounted engine behind you. Getting in and out is no mean feat. Saunders is wearing a brace on his back as a result.

Onlookers stare as the windscreen flips up and he emerges. This is not a car for those who like to blend into the background, and the angry wasp-swarm sound effects from the bespoke exhaust mean they hear you first and know exactly where to look. 'Part of me wants to turn up outside flash restaurants in it. There's a lot of new money in Poole and they park their Ferraris with no consideration for locals. This makes their cars look common.'

Saunders' creation was put together in weeks. He's been building custom cars for 27 years and is recognized all over the world as a result, so the way he describes his workshop comes as a surprise. I expect a space-age clinical environment packed with newfangled equipment. The reality is almost as unexpected as the sheer lowness of the 840mm-high Stratos. 'I do it all in a double garage behind my house,' says Saunders. That means he spends his spare time building crazy cars after finishing his day job MoT-ing normal ones. 'I've got a couple of angle grinders, a really good welding set and some filler

“He spends his spare time building crazy cars after finishing his day job MoT-ing normal ones”

spatulas. I used to do my own spraying, but with modern two-pack paint it's just not practical in my own garage.' The Stratos' startling Lamborghini Mica Orange was applied by local painter Gary Francis. 'The colour just leapt out at me from the catalogue,' says Saunders. 'It was either that or the bronze from a Daewoo Matiz.' It's fairly close to the original car's colour, but that was resprayed silver after its first show tour. 'Silver's too much of a cliché,' says Saunders. 'The orange really suits this car's character.'

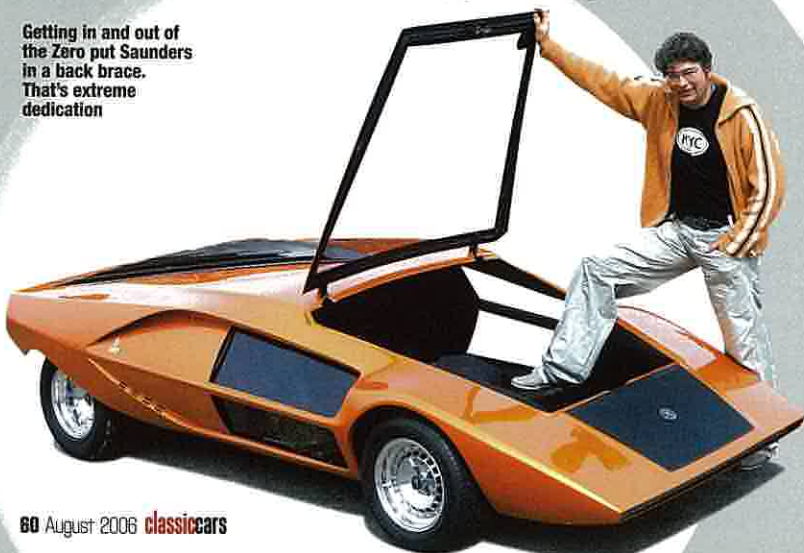
It's time to introduce Michael Jackson. This was once his car. More accurately, its bodyshell is one of three that were specially commissioned in glassfibre to star in Jackson's 1987 film *Moonwalker*. Jackson huffs and struts his way through the song *Smooth Criminal* and suddenly transforms himself into a supercar: the singer himself insisted on the Stratos Zero. As a result, the original 1970 show car was sent from the Bertone museum to Los Angeles, USA, where moulds were taken from it and three glassfibre replica bodies made.

'Then I saw one of them for sale,' says Saunders. He acted on a tip-off from a friend who'd helped him research the history of Aurora, the Fifties safety car that Saunders began restoring in the Nineties (see *Classic Cars*, August 2005). 'He showed me a website and I sat there open-mouthed, thinking: "imagine owning that"'. I carried on reading and couldn't believe it was for sale. Not only that, I could afford it. You only see it in the film for about 40 seconds and never close-up, so I didn't really know what I was buying. The vendor told me it was complete but rather industrial. I'd always wanted my own Stratos Zero. I had to trust him.'

The Stratos body arrived two months later, early in 2005, and spent the next few months in Saunders' garden while he worked out what to do with it.

'I had to find a suitable donor chassis with an 88-inch

Getting in and out of the Zero put Saunders in a back brace. That's extreme dedication







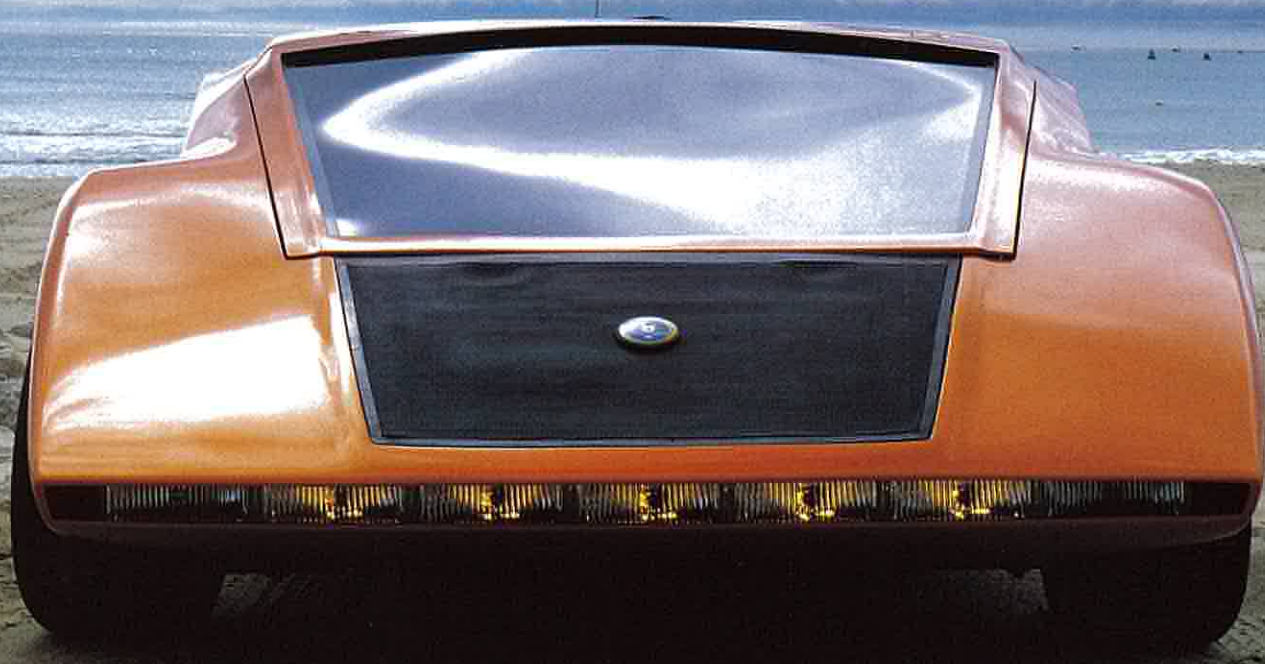
It feels like getting into a jet fighter cockpit – or a UFO – but there's a down-to-earth four-cylinder engine delivering 85bhp

wheelbase,' he says. Saunders thought about the Lotus Elise for its agility and performance, but its wheelbase is two inches too long and the structure too complicated to adapt. The Fiat X1/9 was ideal. 'I just didn't think I'd find one,' says Saunders. 'I thought they'd all rusted out but then I found the perfect one for sale in somebody's front garden. A late model in sound condition, but all the windows had been vandalized. It was too good to cut up really, but it's hardly sacrilegious.'

It was the right size, cheap and suitably Italian. Saunders set about cutting off the body and bracing the floorpan. The sills are boxed in but couldn't be cross-braced to the rear bulkhead because the bracing would have been visible through the Stratos Zero's side windows. The engine and rear suspension stayed put, but the front suspension and steering column needed major adaptation. 'A local accessory shop recommended Gaz dampers to alter the front

MacPherson struts,' says Saunders. They needed shortening by eight inches. 'When I spoke to the guy on the phone he immediately impressed me because he knew there were six inches spare you could cut out straightaway from the strut leg.' Even the gearlever was radically chopped to look right. 'I don't really like mechanical work – I like making things look nice,' says Saunders.

The bodyshell needed work too. The glassfibre along one side had turned powdery and needed refinishing before the paint could be applied. The slatted aluminium engine cover was already fitted but Saunders had to cut out the opening front panel, fit the window, mould in a drip channel to the aperture, fit hinges and make it work. Its remote control latch comes from a Ford Puma. There's appropriate Bertone badging everywhere, mainly pilfered from the X1/9, apart from the stylized 'Bs' along the side, that were made by a local engineering shop.



#### ANDY SAUNDERS' STRATOS ZERO

Engine 1498cc, in-line four-cylinder, ohc, Weber carburettor Power and torque 85bhp @ 6000rpm; 87lb ft @ 3200rpm Transmission Five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive Steering Rack-and-pinion Suspension Front and rear: independent, MacPherson struts, coil springs Brakes Discs front and rear Weight 800kg (1764lb) approx Performance Top speed: 110mph; 0-60mph: 8sec (est)



Lights, wheels, petrol cap and every other detail have been cleverly adapted to fit



SAUNDERS IS AN OLD HAND AT THE SHOW CAR BUILDING GAME

FORD DESIGNER Alex Tremulous styled the X-2000 concept car in 1958, but like many of Ford's Fifties concept cars it was only ever displayed as a model. 'I recently saw footage of it being driven. Turns out it was radio-controlled,' says Saunders. So he built a full-size version.

'An Eighties advert featured a mocked-up Fifties concept car and the front was that of the X-2000, so I bought it, removed the front end, kept the glass (actually two Jensen Interceptor rear screens) and scrapped the rest.'

He built the car in 1997, basing it on the chassis of a 1962 Mercury Monterey. 'There were no pictures of the rear available – even the Henry Ford Museum in Michigan couldn't help –

so the back end is my own interpretation. The rear chromework and bumper are from the Monterey, while the tail lamps are from a 1959 Ford. The Jensen screen didn't look right at the front so I used the rear screen from a scrapped Renault 25 that was perfect. I hand-crafted the rest of the body myself in steel.'

Inside are Jaguar XJS seats and the dashboard is actually the front panel from a Triumph 2000 Mk1 saloon. 'That was handy, I tacked it on in an hour.' It's finished off with the speedometer from a 1961 Chrysler.

The car has been busy as a display car all over the world, and was used as the main image on posters for the 2000 Melbourne Motor Show in Australia.

'I got the idea for the wheels from a friend's VW Golf, which was running Schmidt alloys,' says Saunders. 'They look exactly like the original Stratos Zero's wheels. I ordered them to suit the Fiat hubs, stuck the Fiat's Bertone centre-caps on and put Campagnolo stickers on the rims so they look authentic.' The clever-looking tail lights are made from 12-inch strips of red LEDs and the fuel flap was cut from a Mercedes in a scrapyard. 'Don't ask me which model. The groove looked just right to match the Stratos' lines.' Saunders has a good eye.

Now it's my turn to lower my bulky frame into the driving seat – a painful experience that gets no easier once you're in. The screen slams shut and I recline with my knees up to operate Saunders' bespoke pedal box. A tiny Mountney wheel is just above them, between my legs. Ahead is a small TV screen, hooked up to a reversing camera. Great for parking, but you

can't see to either side even though Saunders extended the side windows by 30cm (11.5in) compared to the original.

Fire up and the 1.5-litre Fiat four-cylinder rasps and growls like something with twice the capacity. Extend it through the gears and you're painfully aware

of an ear-splitting racket, thankfully harmonious rather than just harsh, and spritely acceleration even though there's just 85bhp on tap. With only about 800kg to lug, it's ample.

You never get used to the driving position, or the attention you attract. But you do get used to the fact that everything works as it should. 'It needs some refinement work,' says Saunders. Fair enough, but it feels properly engineered throughout, and will always be as alien to drive as it looks. Turn the wheel and it darts into corners the way you'd expect of something that looks this sharp, but you're sitting so low and your view is so far forward that you feel as if you're moving with the front wheels rather than



pivoting over the rears. Panic-inducing blindspots aside, it's enormous fun.

The breeze buffets around the front screen and there are no wipers. 'There's no weather sealing – just like a real concept car,' says Saunders. 'The screen actually vibrates enough to shake the worst of the rain off.' Sounds suitably space age.

By the beach I take one last look at the Stratos before it's time to leave. Like so many classic cars, it has a face. Not the Noddy face of a chrome-grinned Fifties roadster. This one looks like Darth Vader – as shocking as it is impractical.

Will you be using it for the supermarket run, Andy? 'Not often, but then I didn't build it to use every day.' You'd have to be more of an exhibitionist than Michael Jackson even to contemplate it. **EE**



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