

You pull up to a red light. A few seconds later you hear a rumbling as a Honda Civic comes to a halt next to you. The car has tinted windows, flashy graphics running down the side, and rims that barely fit in the wheel wells. The bass from the stereo vibrates your rear view mirror as the engine is revved repeatedly.

As you drive down the main drag in town on a Saturday night, you notice a row of cars in a parking lot and a group of people hanging out. The cars are painted vivid colors and have aggressive spoilers and bumpers. From under the cars, you can see different colors glowing off the pavement. Music plays and some of the crowd stands around a car with its hood open.

Coming home late at night you turn a corner to find two cars in front of you sitting at an idle. As you move a little closer, you notice a girl standing between the cars with her arms raised. She drops her arms and the cars launch forward, engines roaring and tires squealing.

These and scenes like these are taking place all over the country. It's the world of import tuning. The import tuner culture is all about cars, particularly imported cars, from makers like Honda, Acura, Toyota, Mazda, and Nissan among others. These tuned imports are also referred to as Pocket Rockets and Sport Compacts. The tuner scene revolves around bigger, better, and faster. It's dominated by young males who compete in a never-ending battle of one-upmanship. Tuners want bigger and flashier wheels with high performance tires. They modify their engines to increase horsepower, sometimes to triple the stock levels. The cars are also changed visually by painting and adding graphics, body kits, and spoilers so that they often do not resemble their stock look. All

of these elements give the tuner a car that is unique and stands out in a crowd of other imports.

However, import tuning is not a completely new trend. Street racing and modifying cars has been around for along time. In the 1950s, people were modifying cars from the 1940s into “Hot Rods”. They would improve engine performance as well as change the cars’ looks by removing the engine hood and adding graphics like flames to the sides. Immortalized in films like *American Graffiti*, young Americans cruised their cars down the main streets of town at night and had impromptu street races.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the automotive industry began selling cars that were designed for performance from the factory, thus the “Muscle Car” era was born. The late 1980s and early 1990s brought the popularity of the truck. During this time, it was fairly common to see people who modified their trucks by installing small wheels and tires and lowering the suspension to create “Lowriders”.

Import tuning is a continuation of this history of modifying cars. However, with the increases in technology and consumerism it has become much larger in scope. There are automotive shops dedicated to import cars and upgrading a car’s visual look and performance. Performance shops will install parts and often create custom parts to help an enthusiast improve their car. These are the places where people have turbochargers, superchargers, and nitrous oxide systems installed in their cars to add significant horsepower.

In addition, auto parts stores like Checker Auto Parts and AutoZone have begun catering to the import tuner crowd by providing easy access to parts and mods. They

carry everything from performance mufflers and cold air intakes, to vinyl graphics and underbody neon.

Car manufacturers have also begun to address the import tuner market by offering cars that come straight from the factory with performance and visual appeal in mind. One of the first companies to offer a factory tuner was Subaru with their WRX. The WRX has sports car features like suspension and all-wheel drive, and a turbocharged engine that puts out 230hp(horsepower). With a 0 to 60 miles per hour(mph) time of 5.8 seconds and a price under \$25,000, the WRX became the definition of cheap speed.

Other companies have begun to follow suit. Mitsubishi has the 286hp turbocharged Lancer Evolution, Mazda has the MazdaSPEED 6 turbocharged with 274hp, and Dodge has the turbocharged SRT4 which puts out 230hp. Recently, Chevrolet joined the sport compact market with the Cobalt SS that can be supercharged to 205hp and has a 0 to 60mph time of 5.9 seconds. The stock Cobalt puts out 145hp and crosses 60mph in 8.4 seconds. Therefore, with a little tuning by the factory the Cobalt is able to shave off 2.5 seconds.

### **Tuner Terminology**

**Tuner/tuning** – A person who or the act of increasing the performance of a car or improving the visual appeal.

**Imports/Sport Compacts/Pocket Rockets** – Imported automobiles that are smaller in size, but have or are modified to have sports car performance aspects.

**Turbo** – Short for turbocharger, is a performance part designed to increase horsepower by forcing air through the engine using pressure from exhaust gases.

**Supercharger** – A performance part that increases horsepower by forcing air into the engine through the use of a pulley and gears attached to the engine.

**Cold Air Intake** – A CAI is a performance part that replaces the stock airbox and filter with one that allows a higher volume of cool, dense air into the engine which improves engine efficiency.

**Headers** – Piping that brings the exhaust from each cylinder down into one pipe that leads to the muffler. Increasing the size can increase horsepower by allowing exhaust gases to leave the engine more freely.

**Cat-back Exhaust** – Refers to the exhaust system from the catalytic converter back to the muffler. Increasing the size of these pipes and mufflers can increase the horsepower and sound by allowing exhaust gases to exit the engine more efficiently.

Manufacturers like Scion have taken it a step further by offering a lineup of cars that offer numerous customization options at the dealership. A buyer can choose from various styles of rims and can add performance parts like lowering springs, mufflers, and a supercharger.

“I live my life a quarter mile at a time. Nothing else matters.” Vin Diesel’s character Dominic from the movie *The Fast and the Furious*, demonstrates how street racing and the import tuner culture has begun to slip into the mainstream multimedia. Within the last five years, numerous movies, video games, and magazines covering the import tuner world have been released.

The Fast and the Furious movie franchise follows import tuners and more specifically illegal street racers. The first installment, *The Fast and the Furious*, covered the tuner and street racing culture of Los Angeles. The sequel, *2Fast 2Furious*, moved to the street racing and import scene of Miami. The success of the first two movies led to the creation of a third movie to be released in June 2006. This edition, titled *The Fast and the Furious 3: Tokyo Drift*, will go back to the roots of import tuning and street racing in Tokyo, Japan.

Import tuning has not influenced just Hollywood either. EAGAMES has produced the popular series the *Need for Speed Underground* which allows a gamer to assume the role of a street racer. Gamers start with a modest sum of money to buy a stock car from real life manufacturers. Then, they enter the world of illegal street racing and earn money and respect with each race victory. The gamer can use his winnings to tune and modify his car to improve the performance and visual characteristics.

The modifications in the game are extensive and allow the gamer to paint, upgrade performance, and purchase parts from real automotive parts makers. Therefore, gamers can see what a car they own, or a dream car could potentially look like when modified to their personal tastes. Other similar videogames that involve the import street

racing scene include *Need for Speed*

*Most Wanted* and the three game

Midnight Club franchise.

The magazine racks of

bookstores and grocers now carry

magazines for the import tuner.

*SuperStreet*, *Sports Compact Car*,

*Modified Mag*, and *Import Tuner* are a

few of the many magazines available

for tuners to peruse. A typical issue

will have reports on trends within the

industry, features on modified cars and

their owners, and information on the

latest parts and how to install them.

### **Tuner Terminology**

**Spoiler** – The wing shaped part on the rear of the car found above a trunk or hatchback.

**Rims/Wheels** – Used synonymously, they are a major visual upgrade to a tuner car and are usually increased in size to 17", 18", 19", and even 20".

**Ground Effects/Body Kits** – These are molded parts designed to replace or add on to the stock front and rear bumpers and side sills.

**Chameleon Paint** – Paint jobs that blend two colors of paint to provide a unique visual look to the car so it appears to be different colors from different angles.

**Tint** – A colored plastic film that is adhered to the windows of a car to block out light and provide aesthetic appeal.

**Underbody Neon** – Bars of neon light that are attached to the underside of a car to add a colored glow underneath for added style.

**Mods** – Slang for modifications to a car.

**Bolt-on** – Refers to performance parts that are design to fit a specific car and the purchaser can just install them.

**Aftermarket** – Means any part or modification added after a car leaves the manufacturer.

Another aspect of the world of import tuners is the World Wide Web. There are numerous websites involving import tuning that offer a wide variety of information, products, and services. Jegs.com is a print and online catalog of automobile performance parts for import as well as classic cars. Gearheads can find virtually any part they want to improve the performance of their car.

Nopi.com is another website that offers a print and online performance parts catalog that is dedicated to import cars. However, Nopi.com also provides information on sponsored tuner cars and events that they host, like Hot Import Nights (HIN). HIN is a traveling car show that awards prizes for cars in various categories and provides entertainment and booths for tuners to enjoy. In addition, Nopi also produces its own tuner magazine.

One of the most common additions to a tuner car is rims. Numerous websites have responded to the demand for aftermarket wheels and tires by selling them at discount prices. Sites like wheelsnext.com and wheelguys.com offer packaged deals of rims and tires that are shipped mounted and ready to install. Tirerack.com takes it a step further and allows you to view a graphic of your specific car with the rims of your choosing.

Numerous websites have also been created that are dedicated to one specific make and model of car. These websites provide vehicle specific information, advice, and how-tos, as well as hosting forums for owners to discuss car related topics. Acura RSX owners can peruse ClubRSX.com, while Mazda6 owners have two sites to choose from: Mazda6tech.com and Mazda6club.com.

The online presence of the tuner culture has led to a new phenomenon which allows tuners with similar interests to organize. Meet and Greets are small gatherings of car enthusiasts who get together, usually in a parking lot or park, to show off their customized cars. On March 11, 2006, on a dreary afternoon at Mounds Park in St. Paul, MN, I attended a meet and greet.

I pulled into the lot not knowing what to expect. Five Mazda 6 owners showed up to talk shop. It was organized on Mazda6club.com in the forums by Mazda606, a young Asian male who wore glasses and spoke with a slight accent.

“So what mods have you done to your car?” I imagine this is the first question asked at every meet and greet ever organized. I proceeded to show them the few modifications I had made to my car and got a compliment from ZoomZoom Diva on the painting I had done. “You’re a more skilled painter than I am,” he said. It was amazing how a simple compliment could give me such a sense of pride in my work. I began to get a small sense of what tuners feel when people admire their car.



My Mazda 6

Contrary to the username, ZoomZoom Diva is a thirtyish male, with a healthy build and a strong interest in cars. If you saw him, you would not expect him to be an import tuner. No one would guess that he names his cars either. He owns a Red Mazda 6 Hatchback named “Brad”, and a Mazda RX7 convertible named “Rex”. He is living proof that tuners come in all different types.

Even though the tuner scene is definitely male dominated, there are women involved in various aspects of the culture. Perhaps the most common role is as models. Since the core demographic of tuners is young males, models are used to promote products, magazines, and events. Most tuner magazines feature women in each issue as models of the month. In addition, events like HIN have contests for women to compete in

as models. Some women in the tuner scene are also involved because they have boyfriends with tuner cars, or they like to be around cool looking or fast cars.

However, women can be import tuners as well. Although there are far more men, there are women who modify their cars and enter contests and races. The January edition of *Modified Mag* profiled a Lexus SC400 that was heavily modified by a girl named Emerald. It takes a lot of work and effort to get a car in a magazine, so Emerald is proof that there are women who get into tuning imports just as much as men.

“I’ll be customizing cars till the day I die.” Carlos Trevino sums up the feelings of a lot of import tuners in one short sentence. Tuners are passionate about their cars and about modifying cars. To truly understand the import tuner world, you need to talk to an actual tuner. Therefore, I spoke with a couple of tuners that represent each of the two divisions within the culture. Some people are into speed and having races on the street. They pour their money into squeezing out every last bit of horsepower they can. Ivan Trevino falls into this group. Other people are more into the aesthetic appeal of their car. They spend thousands of dollars to give their car the hottest new look, sound and feel. Carlos Trevino belongs in this group, referred to as “All Show-No Go.”

On a brisk Sunday morning, I made my way to meet Carlos to talk cars while he installed lowering springs on his Acura Integra. It was a cloudy, early spring day that only a dedicated car enthusiast would suffer through. After meeting up at his townhouse, we proceeded to his brother Rey’s house.

Rey’s house is in the same neighborhood as Carlos, and when we got there Rey was already at work on his car. The garage door was open and his red Honda Civic was jacked up on stands. The floor had a grease-stained scrap of carpet to lie on and ratchets,

sockets, and wrenches were scattered everywhere. Rey was in the process of removing his front tire to get at the springs.

Carlos has a large build and is wearing a hat, t-shirt with cut-off sleeves that shows his tattoo, and a pair of mechanic's gloves. He grew up in Puerto Rico as well as the United States. Carlos is bilingual in English and Spanish and frequently hops between the two when talking with family and friends. When he was around thirteen or fourteen in Puerto Rico, he would hang around his older relatives who would modify their cars and add stereos and subwoofers. He tagged along to car shows as well, where they would admire the customized cars. Carlos got his first car handed down to him at age sixteen, a 1979 Colt Champ hatchback. He wanted to modify it right away so he installed his mom's house speaker to add bass. Shortly thereafter, she found out and made him remove it.

To some extent, Carlos has customized every car since then. A Suzuki Samurai, a Toyota Corolla SR5, all have received various upgrades like rims, ground effects kits, and



Carlos' Honda Accord Coupe

Integra. His Accord is his pride and joy. He's added a ground effects kit, new headlights, and new side mirrors. The interior has been modified as well with upgraded stereo, Indiglo gauges, and leather seats. Most noticed, however, is the blue-red chameleon paint

stereos. It gives him a sense of personal satisfaction. "It's what I enjoy, it becomes my hobby. Other guys are into baseball cards or jerseys, I'm into cars."

Carlos's current cars include a 2002 Honda Accord Coupe and a 1990 Acura

job. Depending on the angle you see it from, the paint changes color from red to purple to blue. But, as Carlos believes, when modifying a car you're never satisfied. "I've spent about four grand and it's not done. I've got wheels, but now I wanna go bigger, and chrome." He also wants to install a new hood and make it dual-exhaust instead of single. "It's never-ending."

Since he's spent so much time and money on his Accord, he stores it for the winter. During the winter, he drives his second car which is the Acura Integra. However, in true tuner style, he couldn't just leave this car stock either. So, Carlos has had it repainted and added rims that are white with a chrome lip and a sport muffler. He's also added a cold air intake, carbon fiber style side mirrors, a shift knob, and a Sparco steering wheel.

After getting Rey's wheels off and the first set of shocks and springs out, we hit a pothole in the installation process. A common occurrence for the weekend mechanic, we needed a tool we didn't have. In order to compress the old springs and disassemble the shock setup, we needed a clamp. So, we all piled into the Integra and headed to Checker's Auto Parts. On the way, Carlos has fun shifting through the gears and making the muffler roar. The four-cylinder lets out a sort of cackle that sounds more like a dirtbike than a car. Carlos also cranks some rap on the stereo to earsplitting levels to show what his 10s in the back can do. The vibration from the subs is enough to give you a back massage through the seat. At the store, we learn that the tool they have for compressing springs won't work for the springs on Rey's Civic because they're too thick. But they'll probably work for the Integra, so it's back to the garage.

The mention of girls in the car brings up the topic of girls in the tuner culture. It's Carlos' feeling that girls who have boyfriends with these cars like the attention the car gets. For his wife, Carlos says "It's a love-hate relationship." She hates the money he spends, but likes the ride when it's done. He shifts his voice into a falsetto and does an imitation of her. "Oh why you gonna spend all that money?" However, she loves to drive his Accord. "She's got a 05 Altima, but then she comes home from work and drives the Accord."

So is it for other people or himself? For Carlos, it's a little bit of both. It's a little bit status symbol, and like he said earlier, personal satisfaction. "Why does a collector collect? To tell everyone, I got this." He looks at cars like a blank page that he can do what he wants with. "If you're good, you can turn it into a Picasso."

In the tuner world, a stock car is bland and something everyone else has. They want to make their own mark on a car. A car is a way for them to show off and impress people on the streets. They can take it to shows, or just cruise in search of that look of admiration.

After shifting our efforts to Carlos' Integra, at the end of the afternoon we were able to get the front two stock springs replaced with lowering springs. The front of the car is now so low that the tires begin to hide behind the fenders. Another aspect you have to accept as a weekend mechanic, is that you might not always finish what you started. To be a tuner you have to be dedicated and put in the hard work to reach the payoff. And the payoff is why guys like Carlos do it and will continue to do it. "Am I ever gonna quit? Never."

On a warm spring Friday night, I hopped into my Mazda 6 and made my way back to Carlos's house. However, this time I was meeting up with his brother Ivan. I arrived at the house and Ivan, Carlos, and some family and friends were hanging out and eating. As I walked up the steps, Ivan began rapping the letters of my last name. He was sitting on the couch wearing a black wool hat with a brim that was cocked to the side a little. Ivan was sporting a two-day beard and had a gold chain dangling outside of his grey shirt. He gets excited when he speaks and tends to talk in bursts of energy. We all gathered around the kitchen table and talked cars.

"It's like a fashion show, that's how it is with our cars." Ivan proceeded to parallel how getting into customizing cars was like fashion. "The runway in sport compact cars is the highway or the streets." He feels that the car is like a precious item you wear when you go out on the weekend. For Ivan, it's all about the love for the car. "My ride is my ultimate toy."

Like his brother, Ivan has two cars. In the winter, he drives a Honda Civic that he's made some minor improvements to, like 17 inch white rims with a chrome lip. But, his main ride is a 1995 Mitsubishi



Ivan's Honda Civic

Eclipse GST. The white car has low-slung lines and curves that wrap around the car giving it an exotic appearance. In its stock form, the Eclipse GST comes turbocharged and inter-cooled to produce about 220 horsepower. Of course, being a tuner, Ivan had to improve on the stock setup. Although he's made some visual upgrades, like 19 inch chrome wheels and tinted windows, he's concentrated mainly on speed. The stock

exhaust has been replaced with a performance exhaust system. He added a cold air intake to allow the engine to pull in more dense air and improve horsepower. He didn't stop there either. At the end of last summer, he upgraded the turbo and intercooler and had the car professionally tuned to put out an estimated 300 horsepower.

Similar to Carlos, Ivan grew up in Puerto Rico where his cousins hooked up their cars with lowering springs, spoilers, and ground effects. As we sit at the table, a photo album is brought out with pictures of their cars and their relative's cars over the years. "They inspired us to hook up our cars." Ivan looked up to his older cousins. "Now I'm their age and I have a car. I wanna do what I said I was gonna do back then." Ivan's first car was a Toyota Corolla GTS twin cam. Expectedly, he modified it by lowering it and adding a muffler, rims, window tint, and bass.

It makes him feel good when people look and comment on his car. "If it looks good, it looks good. If it looks whack, you ain't gonna get too many compliments." The other day when Ivan was filling up his Eclipse with gas someone approached him. "I was getting gas in my car, and a guy comes up and says 'bad, bad ride'" So even if you're into speed, the car's look is still important. "When I'm in my car I feel like I'm in a Lambo. Some might call it...conceited, but I know it looks good." Ivan feels the audience is the street. When strangers look at your car and say "wow," you get validation for what you've done. "For some reason, it boosts my self esteem. I feel more confident."

One aspect of the tuner culture is typical of American consumers in general. People always want what they don't have. "The more stuff we do to the car, the more we can show off. Other drivers see us pushing these big rims, and everyone else wants the big rims." Ivan also feels that the anticipation to get mods for your car is cutthroat. "You

wait to get it while some other rider's out there with it." For tuners, there is always a competition with the other cars. The whole culture is driven by who's got the fastest ride, the hottest look, and the latest technology.

Performance is how you get ahead of the game according to Ivan. It's not just about the looks, you can be a step above of the rest with speed. "Let's see who gets the ultimate props. That happens at the stoplight." The stoplight is where all of it comes together for the import tuner. First, both cars size up each other's style. Then, wait for the green light to prove who's faster.

Talk about facing off at the stoplight gets Ivan more animated. "You have conversations out there on the highway, you rev your engine and it's like 'wassup'." He has a propensity to tap my arm with the back of his hand to make sure I'm listening. "Once you get the look, you get that tingly feeling," Ivan says, referring to getting a look from someone who wants to race at a stoplight. After the look, both cars rev their engines. "I know what I have, but what does he have." Part of the game is that you never know what someone has done under the hood. They might just have a show car, but they might have a turbo monster too. "When the light turns green, all that adrenaline goes to your legs, to your hand, to your brain. You're energized." Some tuners do it solely for the adrenaline rush, or the thrill of the race. The feeling you get is kind of like an addiction for Ivan. "When you go and you're ahead of the game, it's over. It's like YEAH! It's first, second, and third. And if I'm ahead after third, I stand tall." It's a culmination of all the work a tuner puts into a car. "It's a very expensive hobby, but it's worth it for that feeling."

Cost brings up a whole new level of conversation. Ivan is always thinking bigger. He likes his Eclipse, but he still might want to get a Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution, better known as an Evo. Today, an Evo retails for about \$27,000, so this would not be a small move. When asked what his wife thinks Ivan replies, “She doesn’t care for it as much. She throws it in my face once in awhile.” But, it’s what he spends money on. “It’s my cosmetics, my manicure, my pedicure.” Ivan’s wife still likes his car though. She wanted to take his car to her company’s picnic when she is usually the one who drives. “So her workmates could see it looks good,” Ivan says.

On the other hand, Ivan knows there’s a darker side to the tuner culture. “When I first got here [to Minnesota], I went to illegal street races.” Illegal street races occur all over the country. These street races are a small segment of the tuner world, but they do take place. Ivan’s experience with illegal street racing was clouded with rivalry and animosity. “It’s like a war. You have white people and Asian people, and they don’t like each other.” His experience demonstrates how competitive the tuner culture can get. “You have to be careful. You have to know what you’re doing.” This atmosphere seemed to be part of the reason Ivan does not attend street races anymore. He has a different outlook on racing now. “Some take it to the streets, some take it to the track. The smart way is to take it to the track.”

Hopefully, next time you encounter an import tuner car on the streets you can understand how it came to be. It’s not just a flashy car with a noisy muffler next to you at the stoplight. Someone put a lot of work, time, and hard-earned money into the car to get it that way. And although there is a small segment of the tuner culture that races illegally,

chances are the car you see is probably just someone's hobby. Now, maybe people will be able to appreciate the tuner's passion and dedication a little better.