

STEREO BOOSTING

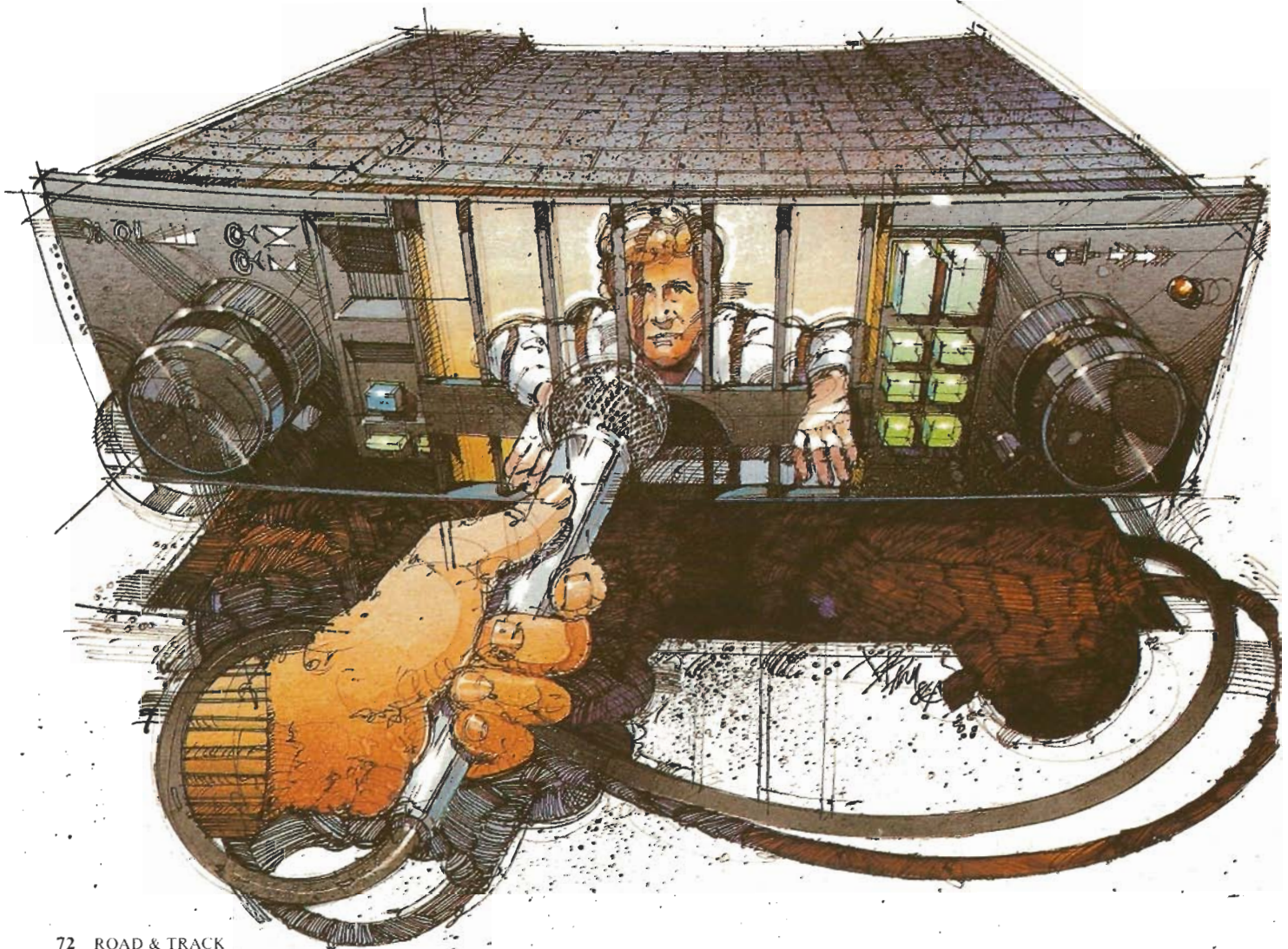
Interview with a car-radio thief

BY GARY STOCK

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JACK C., the car-stereo thief, wasn't what I had expected. On my way to the Manhattan Criminal Courts Building, I'd drawn up a mental picture of what a professional ripoff artist would be: young, loud, a jive-talking street dude, swaggering while he demonstrated the tactics of the auto- and stereo-theft trade. In my mind's eye, I was on my way to meet a nastier version of the role Eddie Murphy played in *48 HRS.*, a punk who would stop to talk to me on the way to early self-destruction. Instead, what I found was a 26-year-old, fairly ruminative nice-boy-gone-bad, at ease in the noise and smell of a city jail, who—if you squinted a bit—looked like the doomed small-time hood John Garfield played in *They Made Me a Criminal*. A quiet, regular sort of guy, with just a glint of menace in his eyes.

Jack has been in a little trouble. He has a string of juvenile and early adult offenses that on the police computer are considerably more lengthy than the proverbial "record as long as your arm." The neatly folded printouts stretch to seven feet or so, in alternating green- ➤



and-white columns, which cover a lot of trivial misdeeds and mischief.

This time, he was in because they had picked him up riding a stolen motorcycle with a teenage girl on the back. The self-destruct factor of the latest caper was undeniable. Neither of them had been wearing helmets—*verboden* in New York State—and the bike had somehow lost its license plate. Jack had offered the cutie a ride, and they'd gone ripping through a park in Queens at 60 mph, headed the wrong way down the park's only road. Then they met a police cruiser. The cop told him later he should have dumped the bike and run, leaving the juvenile girl to explain things. But some mixed sense of honor and protective machismo kept him there, in the glare of the cruiser's spotlight—that and because fighting with the police is the only sure way in New York City to end up serving serious time. "You can murder somebody and walk if you're cool when they bust you," says Jack. "But if you hit The Man, you'll do heavy time."

Jack knows about doing time. He spent some time in Spofford, a juvenile institution where New York sends bad kids to grow into bad adults. Remarkably, for his age, he's also been at Ossining, the foreboding stone prison on the Hudson that used to be called Sing Sing, home to Jimmy Cagney in *Angels with Dirty Faces* and *Castle on the Hudson*.

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And like most other career criminals in The Big Apple, he has spent a fair amount of time at The Riker—Riker's Island, the holding pen and short-timer jail in upper New York harbor where the NYPD sends one pending bail, arraignment and a copped plea.

Jack is a professional car and car-stereo thief in the sense that I am a professional copywriter: He does it regularly in between "real" work, though it is by no means his sole or even primary form of income. Almost everyone who qualifies as a hood in The City steals car stereos; that and lifting car batteries are the preferred forms of generating pocket money for most tough teenagers, because they involve almost no risk and yet pay too little to attract adult criminals.

At times, he has pondered the notion of becoming a "lifter"—a skilled, craftsmanlike pro car thief who acquires vehicles to order for car-theft rings and chop shops. In that business, a man is measured by how rapidly he can bypass antitheft systems and get a car started, and by how little damage he does to a car along the way. A good lifter can be inside an alarm-equipped vehicle in 60 seconds or less, and have it underway, radio blaring, in another minute or two. But Jack has never been able to arrange an apprenticeship with a top-level pro, so he remains in the small-time.

Even so, he's acquired considerable

skills at ripping off cars and radios through a rough and ready oral tradition. The terms, brand names and book knowledge aren't there, but it's clear he understands the street side of automotive technology.

He doesn't know who Robert Bosch is, but he knows what a Bosch starter motor looks like from beneath a car, and how to short it to ground using an old jumper cable. He acquired this knowledge at a tender age from a friend in Westchester County.

He doesn't know what the DIN is or what their specifications are for radio mounting, but he knows that Volkswagens, Audis and BMWs use "little clips at the edge of the radio; you pry 'em out with a screwdriver in two seconds flat" to hold their AM/FM cassette players in place. "That's why everybody hits foreign cars," he explains in a didn't-you-know tone. "They've got the best radios, and they're the easiest to get out. Ever try to take the radio out of a Cadillac?"

He doesn't know how to pronounce Blaupunkt, but he knows that Blaupunkt cassette units are a known and salable commodity on the street, and that up-and-coming brands on the most-wanted list are Alpine, Sony and Jensen.

He doesn't know what a 3M Stalok electrical connector is, but he knows that little blue plastic cylinders pig-

gybacked onto other wires signify the work of an alarm installer, and that doing the right things with the wires that come from the blue things will usually kill the alarm. He knows very little about how sirens and horns work, other than that even cars with a separate alarm battery will shut up if you find the siren and rip out its wiring with heavy pliers. Jack likes cars with external alarm keys on their fenders; he uses a pair of vise-grips to twist the lock cylinder out, and then shorts the wires behind it together. "Two seconds, the alarm is gone. It's quicker than using the key."

Jack has never used a body repairman's slide hammer for its intended purpose. He's not even sure how it's properly used, but he knows that the cheap ones sold by the Times Square Stores discount chain work fine for tearing out door and ignition locks by their roots. The only cylinders that consistently frustrate him are the plate-covered trunk locks sported by most veteran New York cars, and the new General Motors ignition locks. "There's some kind of clip that holds it in no matter how hard you hit it."

Jack doesn't keep up with statistics, so he doesn't know that a car is stolen in New York City every five minutes, or that only a couple of dozen people in all of New York State went to jail for auto theft in 1983. But he does know that

such busts aren't high on the list of police priorities ("watching out for their own asses is what City cops are into"), and that nobody gets too excited about an alarm going off for a minute or two.

What Jack does know is that he's back in jail, and that he will be there for three months or so to take care of the parole violation "which I can handle, as long as I don't go back to Ossining again." Just before his lawyer comes in, he talks about regular jobs, and how he might make a "straight" living.

In a gesture of citizenship, he offers the following advice to those who would avoid becoming future victims: "Don't leave your car on the street. Don't take it to a cheap garage. Don't buy a fancy foreign car unless you can afford to take care of it in a good garage. Don't put speakers where you can see them in the window. If you get an alarm, get one with its own battery and steel-covered cables, and hide a loud horn where nobody can get to it. Don't use a fender switch. [This offered with a special grin.] Chain the hood shut."

The Legal Aid lawyer, a squirrely ex-hippie with an unsuccessful beard, comes in to talk to him, and our interview is over. Jack leans through the bars to get a better look at the arrest papers, just like Dustin Hoffman did in *Straight Time*, then starts rattling off a list of prisons where he'd like to serve his time.

The lawyer dutifully copies them down. As I walk back through the door, past the rows of prisoners asking if I'll handle their cases for a large deferred fee (only lawyers and the occasional crazy writer come here unbidden), Jack offers one last piece of sage counsel. "And tell 'em to stay out of New York." The door slams with an echo, just like in *Escape from Alcatraz*. 