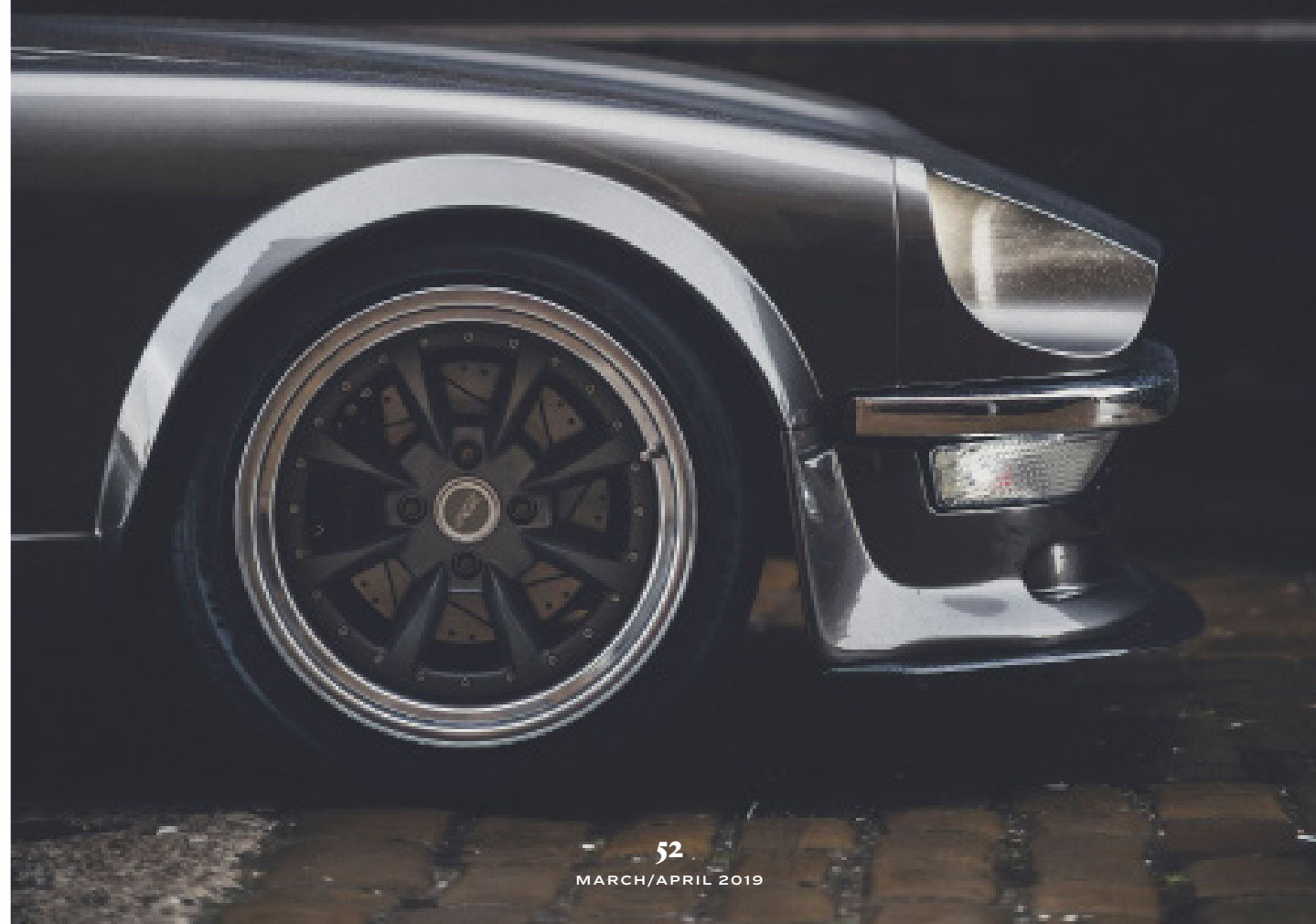


THE HISTORY LESSON | DATSUN 240Z

PROPER COOL

HOW JAPAN'S PRODIGAL SON BECAME LEGEND,
AND THE BRITISH SHOP BUILDING ZS WITH AN EYE TO THE FUTURE.

BY MAGGIE STIEFVATER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMY SHORE



I T WAS RAINING. Bucketing, really, in an urgent, permanent way, water smashing the window of MZR Roadsports in gray handfuls. Everyone in the office regarded the downpour pensively.

Yes, it was Yorkshire; yes, it had been forecast; yes, this was English weather. But I had flown 3000 miles to ride in one of Rahail Tariq's super Datsuns, and the cars, thoroughbreds that they are, are not permitted outside the stable in inclement weather.



"There's just a common kind of joke," Tariq said, "where they say the Datsun 240Z would rust on the forecourt of the Datsun dealership before it even got sold, you know?"

Tariq, 45, is self-deprecating, expansive, immediate. His enthusiasm is of the collaborative sort, hoping for mirrored participation from the class. He's passionate about the Datsuns he restores. Restores? Reinvents. The

240Zs I'd walked by on my way in start as \$8000 shells and leave the shop for around \$90,000 (£70,000) and up.

"A lot of [my clients], it's like, 'Okay, all my friends have got two 911s, I've got a Lamborghini, all my mates have got the same,'" said Tariq, in his swift, musical Northern accent. "Now I need *summat* different from everybody else."

He says "roost" instead of "rust," "zed" instead of "zee." He pokes fun at himself. He told me he did an interview on YouTube, and in the comments, "the Americans were like, 'You ponce! It's not zed, it's zee!'" He apologizes for waffling on. Sentences begin, transform, then turn corners before ending with exclamation points. One thing reminds him of another, which reminds him of a third, which finally reminds him of something he wanted to tell me about a client. "That guy," he said, "is proper cool"—though by then I lost track of which guy he meant.

He looked at the rain. He asked if I wanted tea. Coffee. Something to eat. His wife was displeased with him, he

explained, when she discovered he'd failed to appropriately feed a client from Switzerland. These are high-class cars; their buyers, high-class humans. Coffee is called for. Sandwiches. Organic greens.

Early Datsuns are as far away from Tariq's spendy coupes as one could imagine. The brand dates to 1914, when Masujiro Hashimoto of Kwaishinsha Motor Car



Works named his first automotive effort DAT, after Den, Aoyama, and Takeuchi, his three backers. Four years later, he named his smaller sophomore auto Datson, son of DAT, a proper name for a proper sequel (later changed to Datsun—more elegant to both Japanese and American ears).

War demanded reliable pickup trucks. Postwar economy demanded austerity. While Detroit was building Ford Super Deluxes and Chevrolet Fleetmasters, roaringly bright status symbols, the Japanese were asking Douglas MacArthur for permission to buy oil in order to make any steel at all.

In 1952, at the urging of a whimsical ad man named Yutaka Katayama, Nissan put sports-car shells on top of 50 Datsun pickup chassis to create the Datsun Sport DC-3, a



two-door roadster. Its top speed was 44 mph; sales, even slower. Two-fifths of the DC-3s were unceremoniously converted from carriage back to pumpkin. Japan's—and Katayama's—first sports car returned to hauling freight.

No one would've predicted it was the precursor of one of the best-selling sports cars in the world.

MZR'S YORKSHIRE
SHOP SHELTERS ITS
STABLE OF REVIVED
DATSUN Z CARS.



“EVERYTHING STARTS SOMEWHERE, DOESN’T IT?” Tariq said. He described his first brush with the 240Z. “I picked up a magazine, lo and behold, there’s an advert, and it was a side profile of the 240Z. I just thought . . . Whoa, that is a really cool retro machine.”

Tariq and Martin Ryland have been bringing up 240Zs under the moniker MZR Roadsports for two years. Their meet-cute took place in France. Tariq was just a man looking for someone to do a restoration on a Z. Ryland was just a man who did a ton of Datsun builds, including the last couple Spike Anderson-authorized Samuri cars (well-regarded, wicked-quick modified Zs). The two are a somewhat unlikely pair: Tariq, loquacious; Ryland, reticent.

“What did you think of Rahail when you met him?” I asked Ryland.

“Short,” he replied.

The duo works out of a large Yorkshire workshop with seven full-time staff. By the time I arrived in late November, most of the cars, including their latest press car, had been taken off the road for winter upgrades. Their bright

MZR reassembles the 240Z with entirely new components. The cars are bespoke. Exclusive. Datsun-plus.

bodies slept soundly as I poked around. I sat in the press car. It didn’t smell. It seemed like it ought to smell. I’m unaccustomed to an odorless classic car. The interior is better than new. It seems suspiciously like it would start every time.

“It’s very clean in here,” I told Tariq.

He blinked around. “Is it?”

I didn’t mean just the car. The spotless shop has more in common with a factory than a mechanic’s garage, which reflects how they work.

“All we do is the Datsun 240Z,” Tariq said. “We don’t do the 260, we don’t do the 220. We’ve got loads of people inquiring, can you do this to my car, can you do that. We don’t do upgrades. We just build from-scratch, full, complete, MZR 240s. We’ve settled like a production line now so everything [is standard], like the wiring looms are all for fuel injection.”

The cars begin in California; according to Tariq, if you chemically dip a U.K. car, “nothing comes out from the corrosion.” Even these white-teeth West Coast cars have large body sections cut out—areas prone to rust, as

well as those that get in the way of restoration. Then comes the chemical bath, epoxy primer, high-end paint, protective underbody coating. Finally, 1200 work hours later, MZR reassembles the car with entirely new

components, from a 3100-cubic-centimeter, L-series six-cylinder under the hood to Swiss heather loop carpet in the cabin. Bespoke. Exclusive. Datsun-plus.

Tariq had never owned a classic before his first Datsun. (Impulse buy. EBay.) His father, however, worked as an automotive technician in the ’70s and picked his son up from school in the nicest car that needed a road test.

“You know, it must’ve stayed in my blood without me knowing it,” he mused.

I can’t tell if Tariq notices he’s describing himself when he outlines the typical MZR client. These affluent bruisers are younger than ever; their youngest is 27. Successful. Collectors. Most have never owned a classic. Their fathers had unmodified classics that left an impression. Now they’ve scrolled through Instagram and “want something cool and fast and safe and reliable. And that’s where we step in.”

Sixty years earlier, Katayama was thinking the same thing.

IT’S GROUND-UP WORK AT MZR. BASIC SHELLS ENTER THE SHOP, AND SHINING GEMS EXIT.

“THE PERFORMANCE OF THE DATSUN is best described as melancholy,” noted *Road & Track* in 1958. Mobile coffins, the Nissan salespeople called the 210 behind closed doors. These early Datsuns had no air-conditioning, heating, or radios. Cold starts were roulette wheels. Because postwar Japanese roads were so poor, the 210 was built with one-millimeter-thick steel (as opposed to the 0.6- to 0.7-millimeter steel used for foreign cars). The 988-cubic-centimeter engine managed 0 to 60 mph in 46 seconds, which was just as well, because of the notorious brake fade. When the team that accompanied the first Datsuns to the U.S. found the entire Nissan board of directors waiting to welcome them home at the Tokyo airport, one of the engineers hastily stuck two of his teeth back into his mouth with chewing gum. He lost them when the Datsun he’d been driving plowed into the back of another car.

By 1960, Japanese imports represented only one half of one percent of the U.S.-import market. Life as a Nissan executive was hardscrabble. Koichi Iwata, export

a fanciful man, the sort of person who traveled with a kite in his car and wore 10-gallon hats to American functions. He spoke in something that was neither Japanese nor English, but his enthusiasm was universal. He wanted people to love their cars. He wanted people to love his cars.

“He was a very unusual chief executive, such a gentleman, such a quiet person. Commanded a lot of power,”

Katayama had bigger dreams. His enthusiasm was universal. He wanted people to love their cars.

remembered Peter Brock, who ran the West Coast Datsun factory racing team. He told me a story of his 240Z racing days: Katayama wondered if the team was winning too much. He wanted racing to be fun. He was worried, Brock recalled, that they would be “the ugly Japanese that came over and overpowered everybody. He was so kind.”

In the '60s, Katayama had been benevolently exiled from Tokyo to research the Western markets. See what Toyota's up to, said the small print, and sell some pickup trucks far away from us. Far, far away from us.

Katayama, who felt squashed in Japan, flourished in California. He became “Mr. K” as he went from door to door, trying to persuade Japanese gardeners to buy Datsun pickups, and from dealer to dealer, trying to persuade American sellers to hawk Datsun cars. In America, cars were status symbols—they said something about you. What did a Datsun say?

It said that you couldn't afford anything else.

Katayama had a theory that Volkswagen's success (more than 45 percent of the import market at the time) was twofold: VW sold to customers Detroit considered good only for used-car sales, and it had a helluva service program.

Short-term affordability plus long-term reliability. Datsun could do that, Katayama thought. Datsun would do that.

New-car dealers scoffed, so Katayama rolled into dusty used-car lots. You won't have to pay up front, he told them. Keep the cars until they sell. If you get rich selling Datsuns, Datsun gets rich selling Datsuns. They're gonna be great. The used-car dealers were all-in. What did they have to lose?

If only Katayama could see how far the Z has come.



manager, had such a small budget from Tokyo that he could only afford black-and-white brochures for the first L.A. import show. When Soichi Kawazoe, head of the eastern division, discovered that a number of 210s had sprung leaks at a Norfolk, Virginia, dealership, he had to repair them himself, using tools borrowed from a local service station. Katayama developed a phone system with his regional salespeople to avoid long-distance charges: They were to call in at an agreed-upon time, and if they had nothing to report, they would let the phone ring three times and hang up.

Yoshihiko Matsuo, the designer of the Z, said, “There was a very real, very overwhelming gap between us from the advanced nations of America and Europe.”

Katayama had bigger dreams for Datsun. He was

DATSUN SUPPLIED 50 240ZS FOR BOB BONDURANT'S (SECOND FROM LEFT) RACE SCHOOL IN 1972. THE DEAL PROMOTED AND LEGITIMIZED THE Z ON U.S. SHORES.

THE CONCEPT OF IMPECCABLY reimagined classic cars with eye-widening price tags isn't exclusive to MZR. Eagle will build you an enhanced E-type for \$195,000 to \$600,000. Revology's reproduction '67 Shelby GT500 will set you back \$227,000. Icon creates super Broncos that range from \$160,000 to \$1.6 million. Automobili Amos will sell you something called the Lancia Delta Futurista, an '89 Delta Integrale bitten by a radioactive spider, for \$347,000. David Brown Automotive has the prettiest Aston you've ever seen for \$860,000. And then there's Singer, which modifies Porsche 911s to the tune of \$1.8 million (as profiled in our October 2018 issue).

But Datsuns?

Twenty-two years ago, Nissan tried to sell refurbished 240Zs for \$25,000. Operative word: tried.

"There was a guy trying to do that six years ago, I think," Brock said, when I told him about MZR. "I think he was doing it about six years too early."

Four years ago, I bought a 280Z for four figures. (Impulse buy. EBay.)

Eighteen months ago, I was shivering with a Sharpie in hand, signing a reader's battered 240Z in a midwestern parking lot.

Datsuns are only beginning to enjoy a revolution of reputation: from sporty beater to resto-lux.

To get a seat at the luxury table, MZR Roadsports uses as many MZR-exclusive components as possible and constantly scours social media to see what's up-and-coming, what has fallen flat, and what is newly possible. They have to inspire confidence at every level.

"We've got to bully our way into the market," Tariq said. "We're trying to merge British engineering, Japanese high-quality automotive art, blend them together, and hopefully crack that sort of stereotype where the Datsun's a budget brand."

Tariq's rolling into Instagram like Mr. K rolled into used-car lots decades before, and the fish are biting. MZR has clients in Hong Kong, Switzerland, France, and Saudi Arabia.

In 1969, Nissan did the math to discover what a car needed to be relevant in the U.S. market. Fifty years later, MZR is doing new math to discover what a car needs to be relevant in a whole new market: the internet.

In the 1960s, Yoshihiko Matsuo was assigned to be chief of Nissan's newly created Number Four Design Studio for sports cars—one of only two staff members. He had no solid development plans from above, but he was undeterred. He created more than 20 full-size clay models of what would become the Z, and eventually, Mr. K got wind of it.

Their meet-cute took place in Japan. Matsuo was just a man who wanted to create an inexpensive, modern,



global sports car. Katayama was just a man who wanted to sell a ton of them.

"If I had not met Mr. Katayama, the Z would not exist today," Matsuo said.

In the petite form of Matsuo's concept, Mr. K saw the car that would conquer American soil. Plans galloped forward. It would have the 510's OHC four-cylinder with an additional two cylinders, twin SU carburetors, and a four-speed manual. For once, Tokyo signed off enthusiastically.

Battles remained. Matsuo squabbled over the car's height—production wanted it bigger, to accommodate the average American, and Matsuo fought to preserve its sleek, low silhouette. Mr. K squabbled with Nissan president Katsuji Kawamata over the name. Kawamata was fond of the moniker Fairlady. Mr. K insisted that red-blooded Americans wanted a badge that would put hair on their chest: Tiger, Puma, Eagle. Something with claws. Possibly fangs. Or at least the letter Z, a good, aggressive letter that evoked a victorious flag flown during the Russo-Japanese naval war.

The sports car needed more than a new name to be suitable for American roads. During final test drives, the larger fuel tank required for long American journeys upset the rear differential's placement, introducing a whole-car shake. Rather than lengthen the line of the rear and moving the diff, Nissan stripped the car of as much weight as possible to improve fuel efficiency, then gave it a smaller gas tank.

When the car finally arrived in the States, Mr. K pried off the Fairlady badge by hand.

Thus, the 240Z.

Datsun went on to sell almost 1.5 million Zs around the world—just about 1000 times more cars than the brand sold its first year in the United States.

"This car is made in Japan," Mr. K concluded, "but its soul is American."

**MZR'S GOAL: BLEND
BRITISH ENGINEERING
WITH JAPANESE ART.
MISSION COMPLETE.**



THE RAIN STOPPED. It not only stopped, the sun came out, glittering and impossible across the wet pavement.

Tariq had just finished showing me MZR's newest, a custom Stardust gray '72 240Z. It is astonishingly built; the car appears to have been rolled from the factory. Its fuel-injected inline-six puts out 260 to 275 hp, channeled through a new five-speed manual. It rides on 30-way adjustable coil-overs, has custom aluminum brake calipers, custom carbon-tipped exhaust—actually, just put "custom" before every part in the car—napa leather seats, heat and air conditioning, a full interior panel set,

The first MZR restoration is tasteful, but it's just a '70s car made perfect. The latest is a 2018 Datsun 240Z made perfect.

trimmed in exclusive napa and basket-weave leather, and subtly squatter-than-stock hips. The exterior lines are bared-teeth elegant. It's a showstopper. It's a religion.

"What we want is everybody to say, like, that's nice, that's nice,"—Tariq snapped his fingers—"that's an MZR car. Straightaway. That's got to be an MZR car 'cause it's got that spoiler on it and it's got just that kind of quality."

MZR sells 10 cars a year and has no intention of increasing that number. Instead, it'd prefer to turn out ever more ambitious builds. Already, the beatific gray car makes the first-ever MZR effort seem obsolete. That one

is a thorough and tasteful restoration, but it's just a '70s car made perfect. The latest MZR car is a 2018 Datsun 240Z made perfect.

"Singer Porsche are the benchmark," Tariq said. "You see them in the flesh and they're faultless."

I peered into the only car in the shop that remains stock: Tariq's personal 240ZG. One of only 400 made, it's too rare to modify. Unlike the other cars in the shop, it has a dowdy, familiar charm that reminds me of all the '70s cars I've ever owned.

It smells a little.

"It's got character," Tariq said ruefully, "but it reminds me very quickly why I do what we do to our cars. You have to be a 240Z guy to live with that car all the time."

Weeks later, I asked Brock if he thought Mr. K would appreciate what MZR was doing with its six-figure 240Z—after all,

the original goal of the Datsun was to be an affordable sports car.

Brock reminded me that the original goal of the Datsun was to be loved. Mr. K, he said, wanted to build a work of art that its driver would adore. And Matsuo, the Z's designer, said that a truly great car was one that "lingers in the memory."

That seems to be MZR's goal, too.

So perhaps Katayama's slogan for the 240Z, past, fits just as well for the 240Z, future: "This is not a sports car for racing. This is a sports car for you." ■