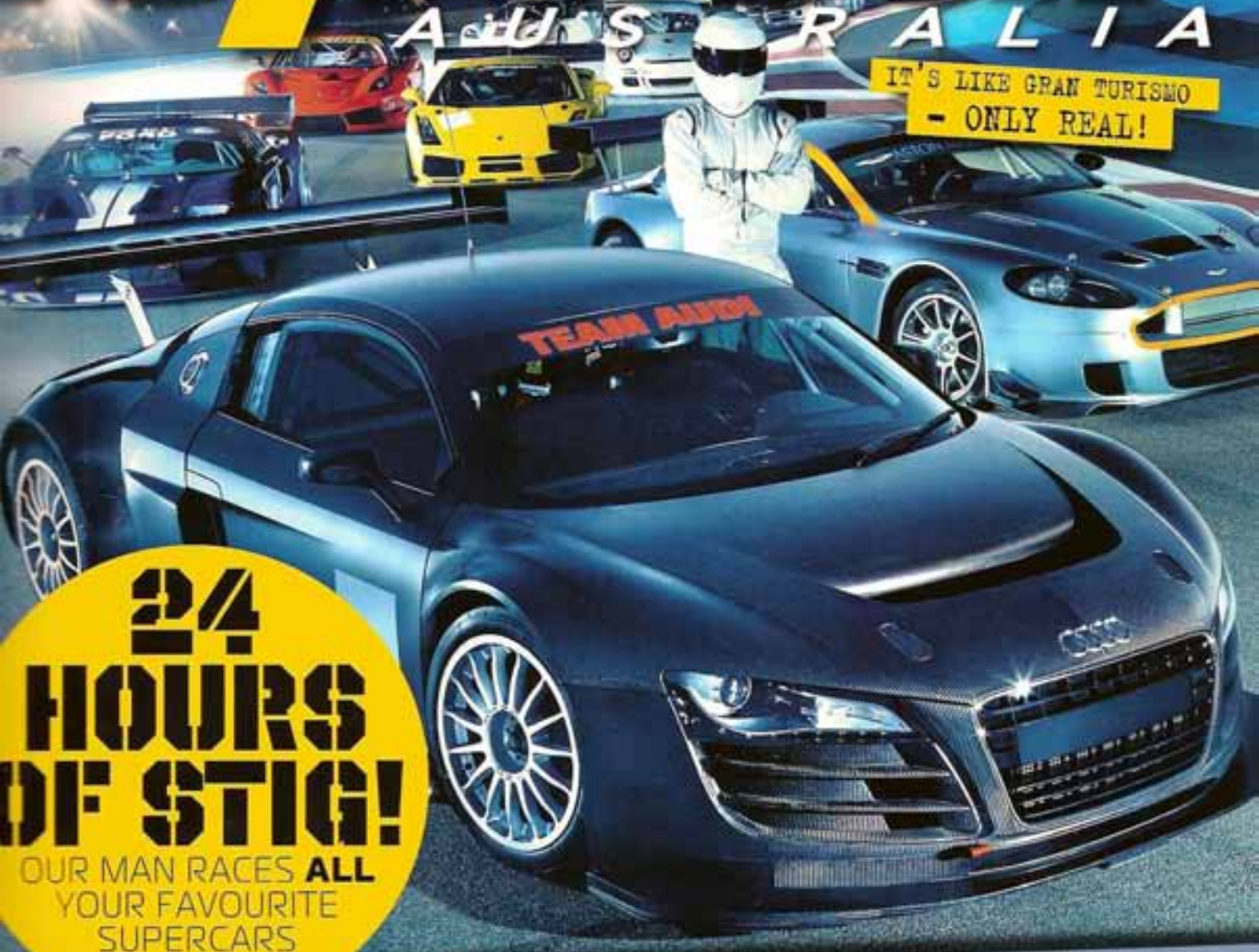


# Top Gear

## Australia

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# BAT OUT OF HELL

From garden shed to fully fledged Aussie super car, the Redback Spyder has *Top Gear* climbing the walls

**Words: Isaac Bober**  
**Photography: Christopher Howe and Glenn Gibson**

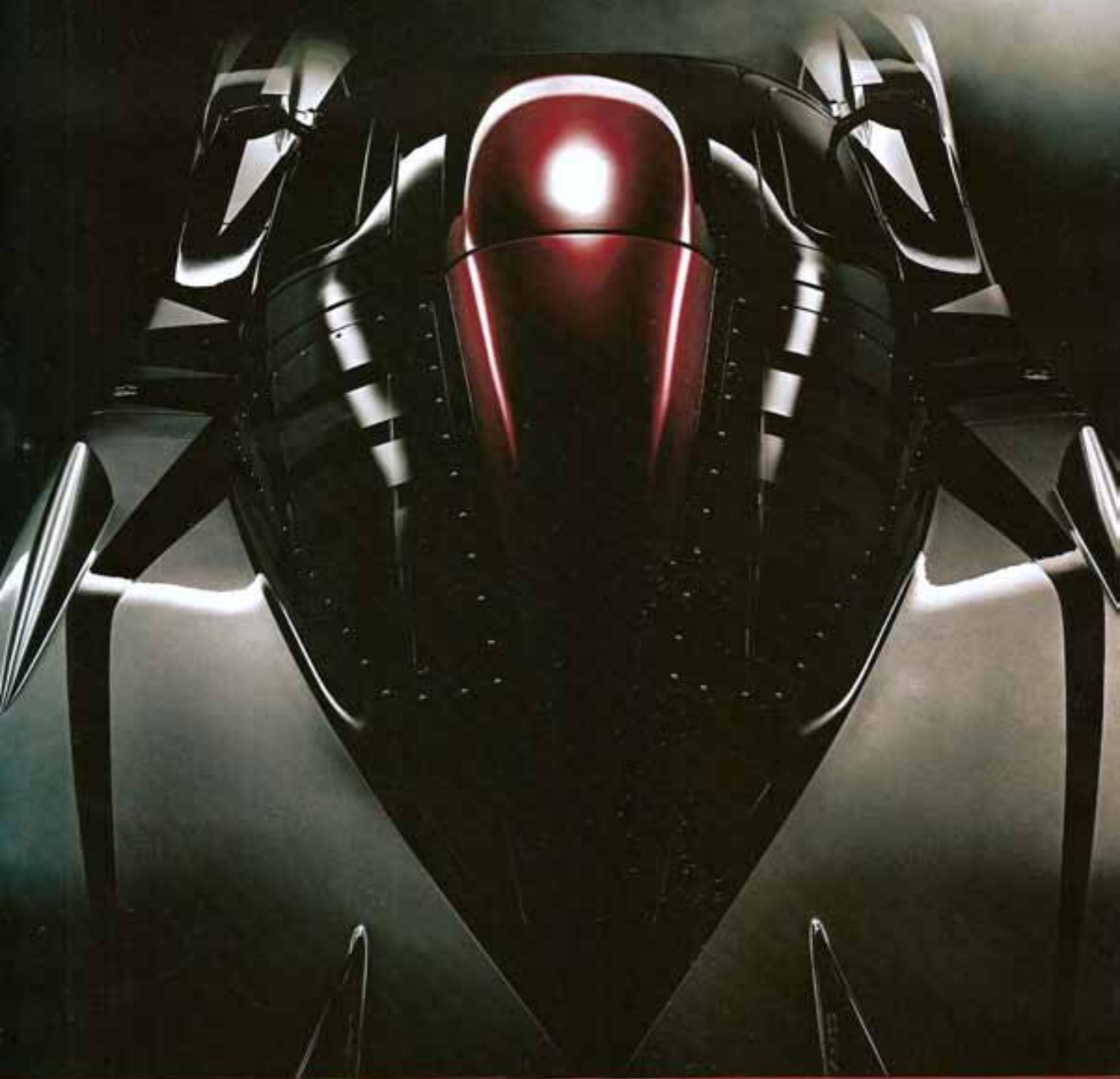
**I**F YOU HAVE EYES AND your downstairs bits are fully functional, you're probably very excited right now.

So excited you're probably reaching for the scissors to snip at this issue of *Top Gear Australia*. We wouldn't blame you.

OK, what you're drooling all over isn't the pie-in-the-sky fantasy of a goateed man in a black turtleneck. Rather, it's the work of a little Aussie battler in a shed... hold up a minute, haven't we been down this road before – half-a-dozen times?

Yes, as a matter of fact, we have. Numerous blokes in sheds have tried to build the next big thing, and every single one of those blokes watched as their car fizzled, farted and disappeared into an unmarked grave. Does anyone recall the Joss Supercar or the Giocattolo? And what about the Bolwell Nagari? No, didn't think so.

Now, for fear of being corrected by a bored and lonely interweb geek, there are chatroom rumours of a faint pulse being felt at Joss and Bolwell. We'll see...



**‘There’s something so non-conformist about the Spider. It’s like Uma Thurman; awkward-looking and hot’**

So what's so different about the Redback Spyder, a car we've devoted a fair chunk of this magazine to? Well, quite a bit actually. For starters, the Redback Spyder you see here isn't a concept; it's an actual road-going car. Indeed, we drove it on this photoshoot. Exciting, eh?

Sure, anyone could mortgage their house and build just one wannabe supercar, but Nick Tomkinson, the man behind the Redback Spyder, has already built two of the things; three if you count the concept (which was an open-topper, hence the Spyder title) that was displayed at the 2002 Melbourne Motor Show. And the first of those cars was snapped up by an American cosmetics tycoon, Mill Conroy, after he double-clicked on it while Google-searching for pictures of, um, dangerous Australian spiders. Anyway, make-up man absolutely had to have one and hang the expense. Result? A large briefcase of cash was posted out immediately, and Nick got down to the tough job of building a car. From scratch.

This transaction means Nick Tomkinson has done what no other Australia wannabe supercar builder has ever done before; he's managed to take his car past the concept stage and actually onto someone's driveway in another country. And while Nick's a bit hesitant to say how much was paid for that first car, he will go so far as to say it was enough to build a second one for use as a development mule, and that's the one you see here, with enough left over to stockpile the necessary nuts and bolts for a handful more cars. Excellent.

But let's not start running before we can crawl, OK. The car you see here still isn't road-legal, although Nick is jumping through >



Our spydey sense says these wheels haven't been driven much

"Can't we do it with the lights on, dear?"








**'Power comes from a naturally aspirated 5.7-litre LSI tweaked to slam out a neck-ripping 330kW and 550Nm'**



Crotch box for the well-endowed? Er, the Spyder's roof, actually

Car innards squishish folks lock away now





**'Rather than consult  
a computer, its builder  
Nick imagines in  
his mind's eye how  
something will work'**

all the necessary hoops to make it so. Right from the word go, he made sure things like the height of the lights, for instance, were bang-on to meet registration requirements. So, watch this space.

In the world of super-exclusive supercars like the McLaren F1 and the Pagani Zonda, it's hard to imagine any of them hailing from a birthplace quite like that of the Redback Spyder. You see, the Redback was conceived on Mulsanne Straight at the Le Mans 24 hour and then built in a shed. Honest. And Nick's shed, which is at the bottom of his garden, is a fair bit like mine, and yours too. I shouldn't wonder. There's a well-stocked beer fridge, a couple of bicycles that have never been ridden, a tent and some dog-eared copies of *Playboy* that were bought for their excellent articles. It's a dumping ground. But it gets better.

You see, Nick isn't an engineer. Nor is he a mechanic. Rather, he's a dyslexic high-school dropout who failed his carpentry apprenticeship. And yet, despite all this, or perhaps because of it, Nick's got an absolutely 'beautiful mind' where engineering is concerned. He's self-taught, as geniuses tend to be.

Rather than consult a computer, he tends to imagine in his mind's eye how something will

work and then sets about building it. Once he's finished, he then has it computer modelled. It's a medieval approach, but it's worked.

OK, Nick might be academically unqualified, but when it comes to nuts and bolts, he's suitably experienced. Indeed, he used to race supermono bikes and worked out a way to improve the design. Supermono was a European class of racing popular in Australia and around the world in the early 1990s. It's for super single-cylinder motorcycles up to 850cc.

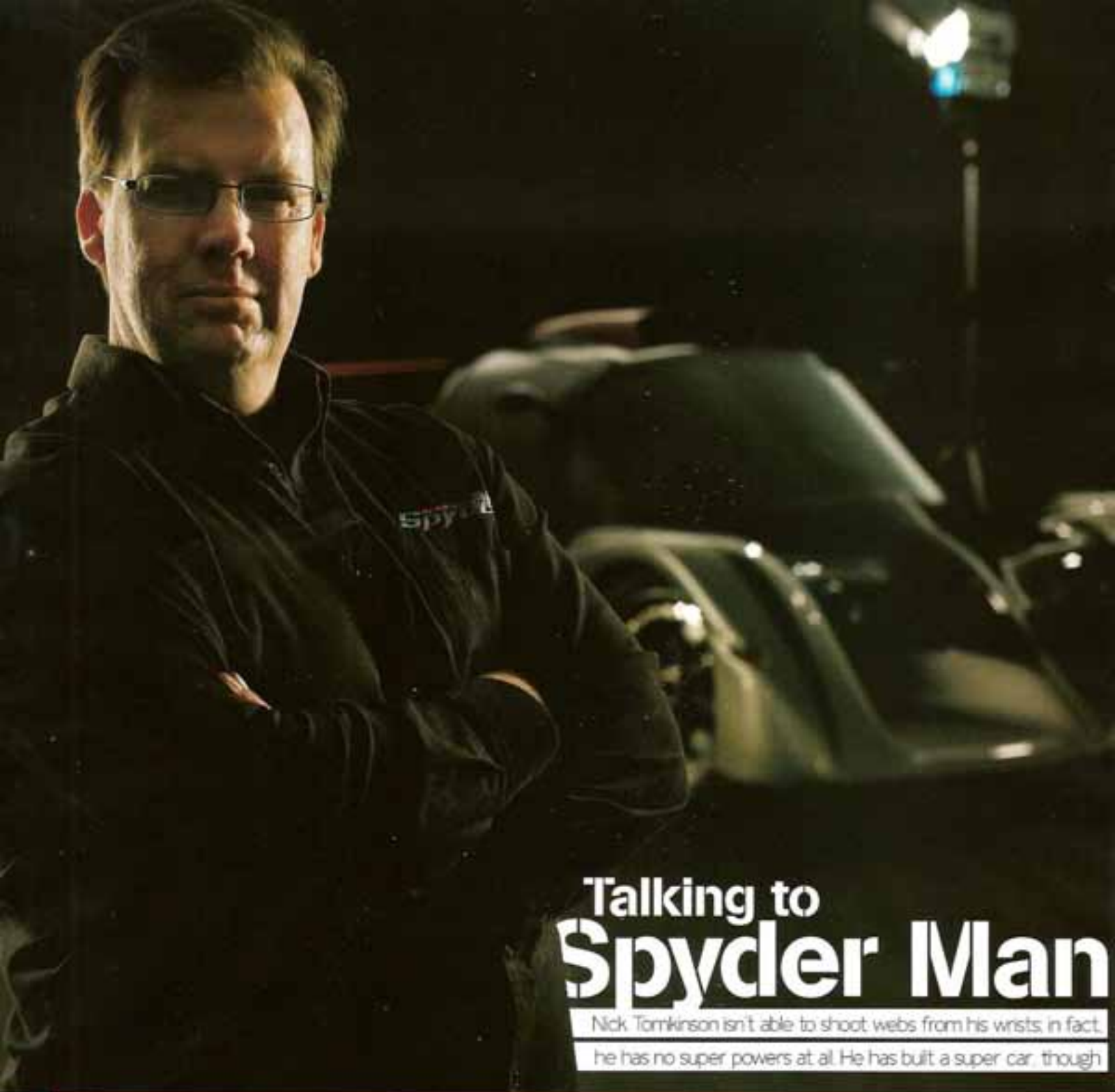
After modifying his own bikes, he started winning races, a lot of races, and it wasn't long before the rest of the field was getting him to build their bikes, too. It's this experience developing and building racing bikes that has had the greatest influence, engineering-wise, on the Redback Spyder.

And nowhere is this more evident than with the car's rear suspension set-up. It's a rising-rate design, inspired by the systems Nick used to fit to his racing bikes. And the advantages, for a car, are many. For a start, there's less unsprung weight, twisting forces on the chassis are kept to a minimum, tyre contact is improved and, as I can attest to, ride and handling are excellent.

Now, without getting too technical, the chassis is a semi-monocoque space-frame mess of chrome-moly tubing a-la bell-bottom-era F1 racers, stiffened by alloy panels that have been glued and riveted over it.

Power comes from a naturally aspirated 5.7-litre LS1 that's been tweaked by Rolco Racing to slam out a neck-knocking 330kW and 550Nm. This is mated to a suitably muscular six-speed manual gearbox, identical to the 'box you'd find in an HSV – although there are plans to fit a new gearbox, and the 'box fitted to the America-sent Redback was a six-speed ZF auto with flappy paddles. The ram-air induction incorporated into the roof feeds a custom throttle body, and Nick designed, bent up and polished the exhaust system himself; he also formed-up the carbon-fibre body panels.

It should be said, Nick had plenty of help with the Redback. Sure, all of the designs and ideas were his, but some of the stuff, like casting the wheels and the custom-made wraparound windscreen, required specialists. Without the help of a huge number of companies the Redback would have been just like every other wannabe Aussie supercar; stillborn. >



## Talking to Spyder Man

Nick Tomkinson isn't able to shoot webs from his wrists, in fact,

he has no super powers at all. He has built a super car, though.

**Okay, so where'd the name come from?**

My initial plan was to build an open-top, mid-engined sports car, ie a Spyder. It was important to me that it be instantly recognisable as an Australian-built car, so what else could it be but a Redback Spyder.

**And what was your design inspiration?**

I was at Le Mans in 2000 and just thought 'Wow, wouldn't it be amazing to have one of those LMP cars on the road?' Then I spent hours on the internet drooling over Le Mans from year dot. There are bits and pieces of all sorts of cars in the Redback.

**At what point did you think you'd like to build your own supercar?**

Since I was about 10 or 11 and I used to draw

pictures of racing cars while I was in detention and should have been writing lines. Then once I got tired of banging myself on the ground and sold my race bikes, which I'd built, I moved onto my next dream, which was to own a Lamborghini

Countach. Obviously, I couldn't afford one, so I decided to build one. And that was fun, but then I thought I wanted to build a car to my own design and my own engineering. No-one would be able to judge me on someone else's work.

**What was the first thing you started working on?**

I started doodling pictures on a pad in a restaurant while at Le Mans, the perfect place for inspiration. So you weren't just having a midlife crisis?

Just because I've got a wife and kids and am 40, doesn't mean I'm having a midlife crisis.

And besides, the car is not red or a Ferrari. And I've got a full head of hair.

**It took you two years to build the Redback Spyder. Why so long?**

Have you built a car lately? And I don't mean rebuilt a car, I mean built from scratch. I had to track down people who could help with this project and would be willing to do it just to be a part of the project, because hardly anything on the car is off-the-shelf stuff, whatever I couldn't build was built by someone else to my design.

**And you built it in your garden shed?**

Where else would you find a Redback Spyder?

**OK, so how fast have you had this sucker?**

Bang on 254km/h! But the runway I was testing on wasn't long enough for me to max it out; it had

Now there's no doubting the nuts-and-bolts brilliance of the Redback Spyder, but the design, for some people, is less convincing. But then, beauty usually is in the eye of the beer holder, right?

There are those in the TGA office who think the Redback looks awkward from some angles, and they're right. But then so does a Pagani Zonda, or a Nissan 370Z, and the SL65 Black, in profile, just looks ridiculous. And I've heard nothing but praise for the looks of those beasts.

There's just something so non-conformist about the Redback Spyder that really flicks my switch; it's like Uma Thurman, she's both awkward looking and hot. OK, I can see plenty of people shying away from it, thinking it looks too Le Mans LMP racer for the road, but that's exactly what it is. And like an LMP racer, the Redback Spyder has been built to work; function has won over form.

For instance, those gaping air intakes at the front aren't for looks, rather they funnel air into the radiators, and so have dictated the aesthetics of the front-end.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, the sale of the first Redback Spyder gave Nick the wherewithal to build this development car and put all the sundry bits and bobs for more cars onto the shelves in his shed. So, can he build more cars? Yes. Will he build more cars? That's entirely up

to you lot. But he is in the process of setting up a new workshop. The order books are open.

That said, don't expect Nick's workshop to be half-filled with leather lounges, mini-skirted bints or an espresso machine doling out industrial-strength coffee while you mull over your Redback Spyder. Nick's shed will always be a spit-'n-sawdust sort of place. You're not buying a Redback to be pampered; you're buying it because it's brilliant.

Now to the price. Well, the sky and the size of your wallet are the only limiting factors, but a lazy \$250k-plus should be enough to secure a basic car. Most will be happy enough with the standard set-up, but the Redback can be totally customised with different engines, gearboxes, and interiors, etc; no two cars need ever be the same.

Sure, standing around and looking at the Redback Spyder parked in a photographic studio with all of its rude bits on display was exciting, but it wasn't satisfying.

We wanted more, and that's why TGA has done what no other magazine has done before; we borrowed the keys and drove the bugger. Now turn the page. ■



**'Just because I've got a wife and kids and am 40, doesn't mean I'm having a midlife crisis. And I've got a full head of hair'**

plenty left. With this engine and gearbox and the weight of the car, and with a long enough stretch of road, it should be good for more than 300km/h. And how'd it feel?

It was as solid as a rock. The faster it went, the better it felt; you could feel the aero doing its job and sucking the car onto the road.

And how do you feel when you're behind the wheel of it?

Awesome! I wanted a car that feels like I am in a Le Mans car every time I go out into the street. And it does. But half the excitement comes from seeing the reaction from other people; I have had so many near misses while people have been trying to take photographs.

It seems to get plenty of attention.

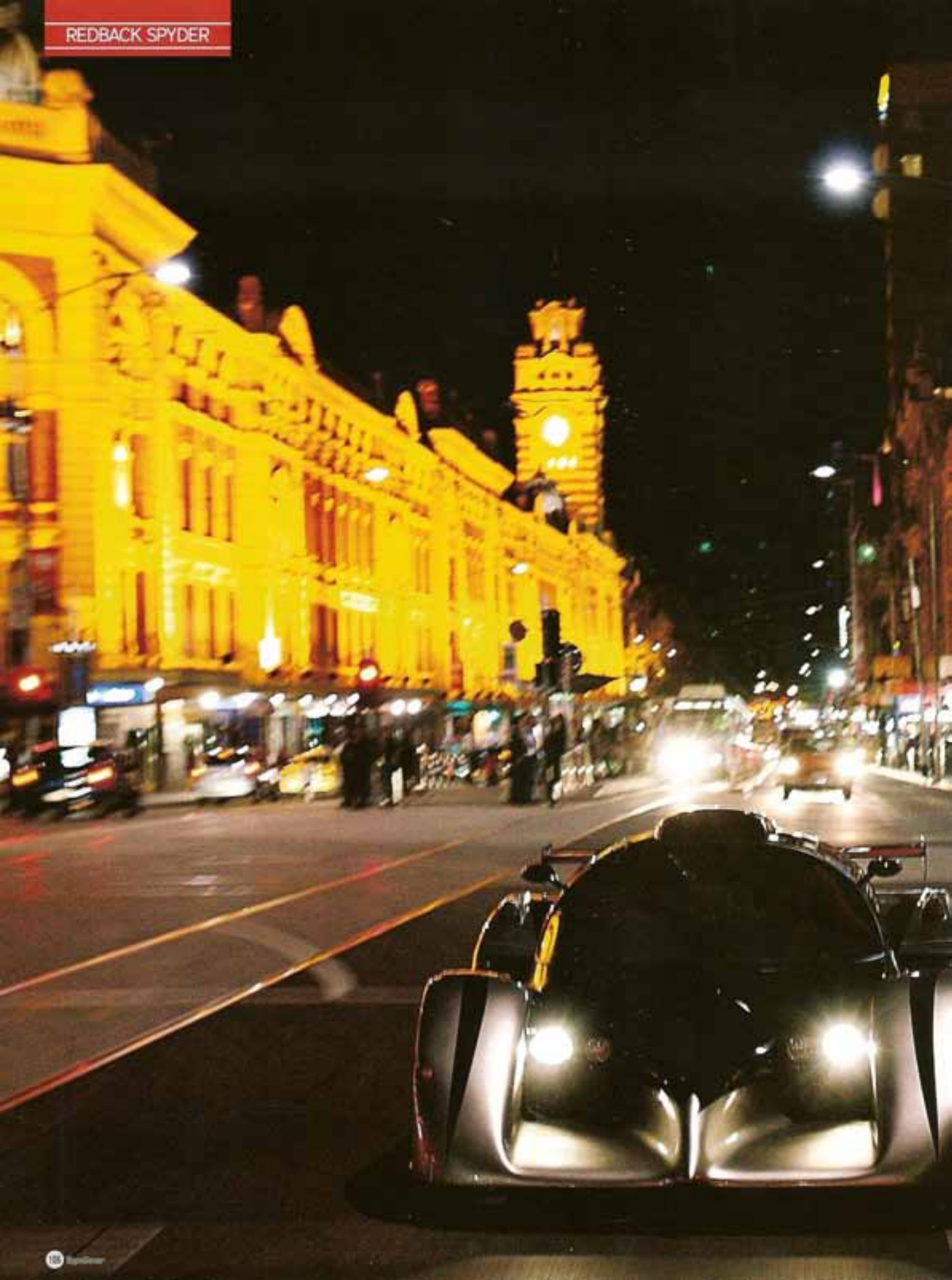
Just a bit. I'm still washing people out of my hair after the Top Gear Australia shoot on Melbourne's Swanston Street. (See over page).

So what's next?

I know the car works in every sense, so now the plan is to reduce some of the hand-built elements and make it more production friendly to keep costs down for potential buyers. And to keep jumping through road-registration hoops.



Takes more than a blast of Mortein to stop this Spyder in its tracks





# Out for a fang

TGA lets the Redback Spyder run through Melbourne's late-night streets - and almost starts a riot

WE'VE ONLY BEEN PARKED UP FOR ABOUT FIVE minutes and already there are hundreds of people surrounding us. And they're all either taking photos, posing for photos or just pointing with mouths agape. Melbourne's Swanston Street is at a standstill. Even the trams have ground to a halt, unable to get past the admiring throng gathered around the Redback Spyder.

It's bad enough that when you're just tootling around in this bubble-canopied supercar you get the sort of attention usually reserved for a Janet Jackson wardrobe malfunction, but this is getting ridiculous. And the police, who've just arrived, agree. They say we're causing an "obstruction", and they want us gone. Fast.

But the crowd doesn't want us to leave, and some of

them are becoming vocal. While one policeman is leaning in through the scissor-lift door, and telling us to "just get out of here" and make an illegal right-hand turn, the other one is telling the crowd, with a straight face and everything, to "move on, there's nothing to see here".

Not a single person budges, though; some are even yelling for the cops to leave us alone. People are still taking photos, posing with the car, tapping at the windows, phoning friends. This is getting really weird now.

It was my idea to come down here. I thought we'd get some good pics, and indeed we are, but now I'm getting scared; scared for us, but mostly I'm scared for the car. People are leaning all over it, a couple of girls are even trying to sit on the bonnet, and a doofus on a bicycle

Words: Isaac Bober Photography: Cristian Brunelli

## REDBACK SPYDER

crashed into its bum. Nick, the car's owner/builder, is behind the wheel now and I can see him starting to sweat. His baby is being violated and there's nothing we can do. We're stuck.

And it isn't until a paddy wagon squeezes in, and a few more rozzers pile out with batons, that the crowd starts shuffling away. Slowly. Phew.

If you want to get a good idea of what it feels like to be sat here inside the Redback Spyder, then simply empty out a fish bowl and pop it onto your head. Then, once you've done that, ask a close friend to wedge their head inside, too. There's that much room in here. And don't even think about looking out the back, because the engine and the engine cover get in the way. It's worse than a Lotus Exige, but hey, in this thing there's not much that can worry your behind.

Being locked into the Redback Spyder's snug-fitting bucket seats is sweet relief compared with the process of climbing into it. I'm still embarrassed recalling how many times it took me to get in. Four, I think, but it might have been five. I'm trying to block it out.

The Redback Spyder has no opening windows and no air-con either, because weight is the enemy of performance, Nick says, borrowing Colin Chapman's (of Lotus fame) mantra. So not only does

it feel claustrophobic, but it's also very hot; I'm talking about the sort of sweaty-hot you get inside a sauna. Just like a proper old-school supercar, then.

But get past this initial discomfort and you'll be knocked sideways by just how un-backyard-built the Redback Spyder actually looks and feels on the inside. The interior fit and finish is miles better than that supposed luxury Lotus, the Europa. Sure, there are some daggy bits of trim, but that's only because this thing is the development car; Nick tries something, pulls it off and then tries something else.

And then there's the noise. Rigidly connected to the bulkhead, to which the seat you sit on is in turn rigidly connected, the tweaked 5.7-litre V8 makes your internal organs vibrate like sex toys. You're not just a passenger in a car, you're the driving force in a living, breathing, snapping, snarling beast.

The mid-mounted donk smashes out a truly nasty 330kW and 550Nm (from 1500rpm), and that's more than enough boot to get you to the legal limit in less than four seconds flat and, with the right gearbox fitted, onto 320km/h. The box fitted to this car is a bog-stock six-speeder, exactly the sort of thing you'd find in an HSV, with all the usual quirks. But the heavy action of this 'box seems

totally acceptable in the Redback; it doesn't feel lazy, or slow, which is precisely how it feels in an HSV, rather it feels solid. That said, I'd still prefer the ZF six-speed auto, complete with flappy paddles, that Nick fitted to the America-bound Redback.

Inner-city Melbourne isn't the best place to get to grips with a supercar, and my stint behind the wheel wasn't a long one, but from the few kicks I gave it, I know the Spyder is properly quick. At least it is once you get a hang of the button-style clutch; it took me four goes, with much bunny-hopping, to get a feel for it. But after that it was all good; you simply step off the clutch and let the torque do the, um, talking.

The ride, even across some of Melbourne's rough inner-city roads, is sublime. Yes, it's firm, but an evening behind the wheel doesn't leave you with a mouthful of loose fillings. And while I can't tell you what it's like at the edge of the envelope, the natural balance of this car is such that even a nervous mid-corner lift should result in nothing more outrageous than the nose tucking in and the bum swaying a little bit.

The best way to sum up the Redback Spyder is to refer to a brief line I scribbled after my drive. It reads: "the Redback Spyder is a meatier, more muscular Lotus Exige." High praise indeed, I think you'll agree. So anyone with a spare \$250k-plus clogging up their piggy bank should give Nick a call. The Redback Spyder isn't so much a car as an Exocet missile for the road. ■

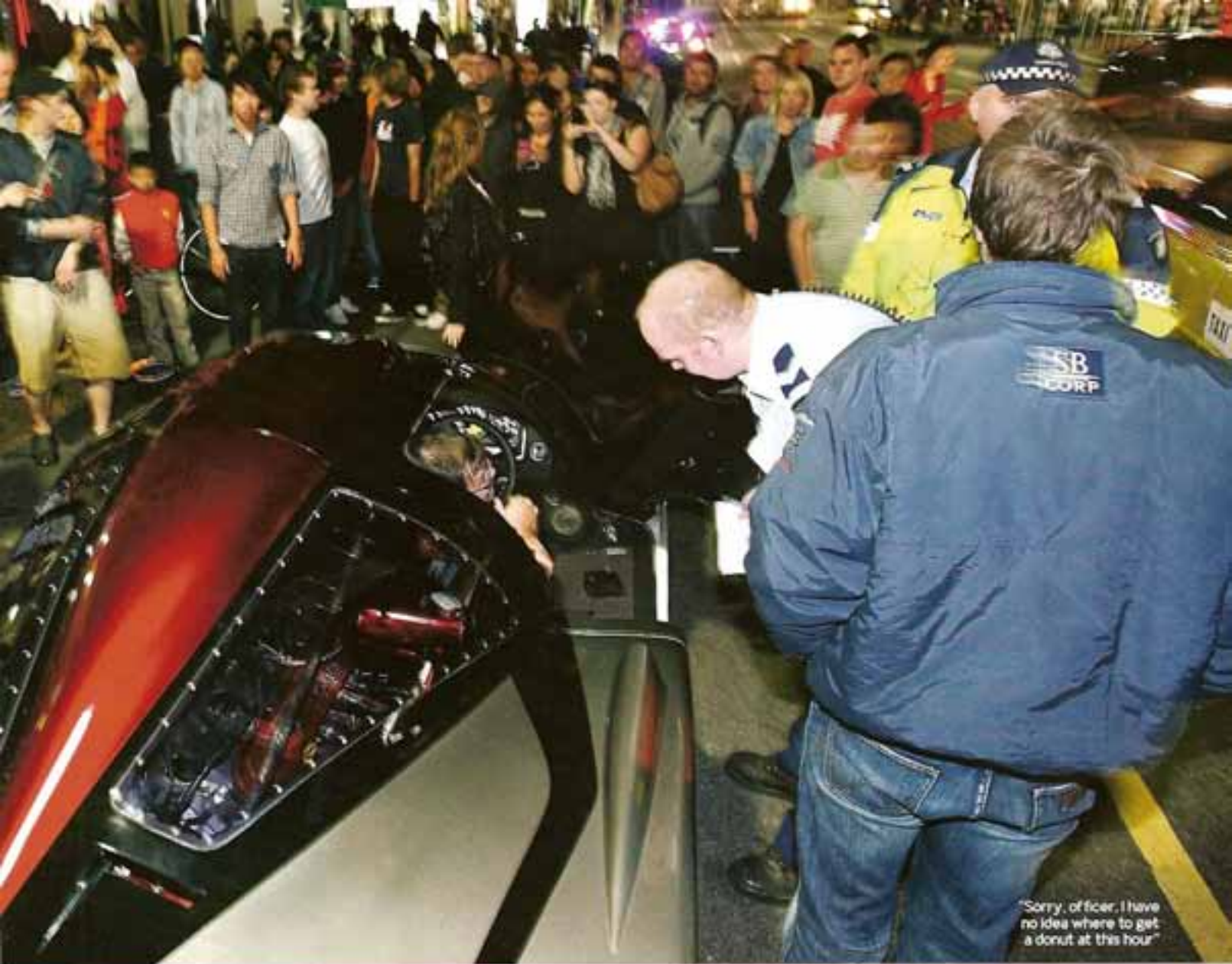
**'IT ISN'T UNTIL A FEW ROZZERS  
PILE OUT WITH BATONS THAT  
THE CROWD SHUFFLES AWAY'**



"Net, mate. Planet Zong's about four billion light years the other way."



"Eww! all-you-can-eat vindaloo earlier, was it?"



"Sorry, officer, I have no idea where to get a donut at this hour."

