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Seen at SEMA: Mean Green Machine

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A couple of days ago, I thought the oddest thing I would see at the SEMA Show was the display of 11 fully blinged out Buicks. Then I saw Jeff Meyer's 1966 Citroen D19, which looks showroom new, until you notice the big chromed wheels and peek under the hood, where you discover the French car's discreet engine has been replaced with a screaming, 410-horsepower LS1 V8 from a Chevrolet Corvette.

Anywhere else, you might ask why? But not at SEMA, where the automotively unusual and unexpected seems, well, expected.

But still, you would expect that actor and clean car activist Ed Begley Jr. would be anywhere else, or should I say, anywhere *St. Elsewhere*, than at the SEMA show, but here he is, at this "celebration of American muscle," showing us a vehicle -- a crew cab pickup truck no less -- that has Katzkin seats, Intro wheels, BFGoodrich tires and Snugtop accessories, but doesn't belch out pollutants as it delivers its duties.

"You don't need a sledgehammer to put in carpet tacks," Begley says, and thus Phoenix Motorcars' electric sport utility truck travels 100 miles, and with good acceleration all the way up to Interstate highway speeds, between recharges -- and, thanks to nanotechnology, those recharges can be made in just about the same time it takes to refill a tank of gas.

And the Phoenix truck is powered by American muscle -- NanoSafe battery maker Altairnano does its research in Reno, Nevada and its manufacturing in Anderson, Indiana.

Begley notes that he's been driving electric vehicles since 1970, uses an electric Toyota RAV4 back home in Los Angeles, drove to Las Vegas averaging a real-world 51 miles per gallon in a gas-electric hybrid, and yet knows that there are times when such cars are not sufficient, that sometimes you really do need a high-powered sledgehammer.

So why show the Phoenix truck at SEMA? Because, says Begley, what electric and hybrid and clean vehicles lack is the style and innovation that SEMA simply exhales. "We need SEMA to give style to these vehicles," Begley says, and thus the Plain Jane Phoenix truck gets Katzkin seats, Intro wheels, etc. for this show.

Begley also says he came here to remind people that it's not just the environment that can benefit from clean technology, and he adds that it cost him a whopping \$12 in gasoline to drive a hybrid from LA to Vegas. As President Clinton used to remind us, it's the economy, and he wasn't talking about fuel economy.

Clean and green have been buzzwords for environmentally friendly vehicles. In light of Begley's presentation, maybe it should be mean and green -- mean as in cool looking, green as in greenbacks as well as green leaves.