

Donald Manzanares demonstrates “three-wheeling” in his custom ’85 Buick Regal, in Española.



# Lowriders: Riding High

The coolest cars in the Southwest take it low and slow. Two museum exhibits and a new book fuel a native son's journey of discovery into their blue-collar roots and metal-flake future.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY *DON J. USNER*

**IT WAS A HOT SUMMER DAY** in Chimayó, cicadas buzzing in the junipers and dogs panting in the shade. Inside my grandmother's cool adobe home, I was sitting down to a lunch when my sister, wild-eyed, came running down the dirt road and burst into the kitchen. She breathlessly reported that some “*pachucos* in a lowrider” had stopped on the newly completed highway—the only paved road in town—to offer her a ride. We shuddered with her to think of how close she had come to misfortune, and Grandma repeated to us her oft-sung warnings about wandering out by the new road.

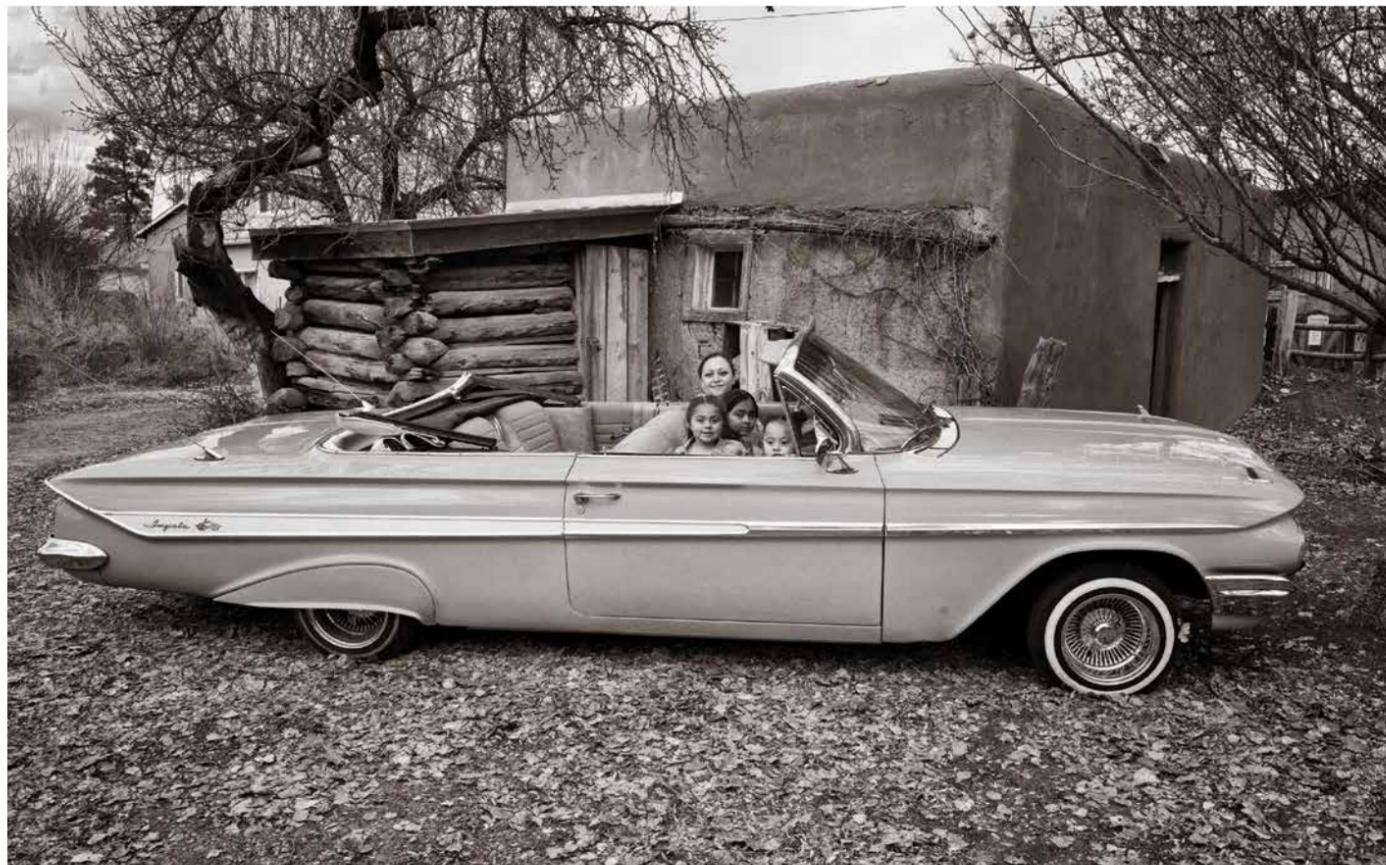
That was back in the 1960s, when I was growing up spending summers in Chimayó, and lowriders—cars with suspensions altered so they ride just inches off the ground—aroused suspicion. They were regarded as inventions of *pachucos*, which, as far as I could tell, meant any rebellious or troublemaking youth. I was frequently reminded to steer clear of everything connected with “lowriders,” a term that referred to the cars as well as their drivers.

I wouldn't begin to shake those early misconceptions for years, and a deep appreciation for lowriders came only recently, when I began to do research for exhibits at the New Mexico History Museum and the New Mexico Museum of Art, and for a book to be published by the Museum of New Mexico Press this fall. My exploration of lowrider culture led me to see

the cars in an entirely new light and to understand their builders as automotive craftsmen and artists of incomparable skill. But it took quite a bit of hanging out in people's garages and at car shows for me to learn what they're all about.

**A**mong the first lowriders I met during my research were Bobby Chacón and Pam Jaramillo. When I pulled up to visit at their home in Chimayó, I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of apparently junked vehicles surrounding me: To every side, old cars sank into the weeds, their paint long faded to mottled patinas. The relics presented a rich palette for my photographer's eye, and the gleaming, finished cars among them—Bobby's bright blue '51 Chevy “bomb” (a name for rotund American cars from about 1930 to 1955), Pam's bright orange 1962 Impala convertible, and others—stood out like jewels.

Pleased to have an interested audience, Bobby showed me around, and through his eyes I reenvisioned the fleet of nonfunctional vehicles not as junkyard artifacts, but as the raw material for lowrider dreams. When he enumerated all the steps he would take to transform the hulks, I realized that the renovated cars represent the culmination of years of trial-and-error learning that began when Pam and Bobby were youngsters playing among



similar car collections owned by their families and neighbors. Lowriding, as these people practice it, is no casual pastime; it's a passion that demands time, money, and the full family's commitment.

Pam and Bobby and their three children—all girls, each of whom has already claimed a car as her own—live immersed in lowriders, and they're not alone. From their place, I drove down the Santa Cruz Valley to meet another fervent and well-known lowrider, Fred Rael, in the Fairview neighborhood of Española.

Renowned for his prizewinning show cars, Fred glowed with pride as he introduced me to his Impalas—an impeccable silver 1964 he's named Boulevard Legend and a sunset-orange, award-winning 1967 called Liquid Sunshine—and his 1994 Cadillac Fleetwood Brougham, which he dubbed Hustler. Each vehicle was chromed and painted meticulously in Fred's trademark, understated style: crisp pinstripes and lustrous colors, ready to vie for car-show prizes.

When we stepped around the back of the garage so Fred could point out some of his unfinished cars rusting in a field, I noticed a stenciled image on the wall: a mustachioed, grinning, impish figure wearing a fedora—a motif that shows up frequently in lowrider iconography. The image represents a stylized pachuco, and seeing it there reinforced an idea I had read often: The first lowriders to hit the streets were Mexican American pachucos in El Paso, Texas. Contrary to the impression I had as a youth, these were not just troublesome gangsters; instead, they represented an important cultural movement that expressed itself through a distinctive manner of speech and dress (including zoot suits, pocket chains, and fedoras). After World War II, the lifestyle spread to Los Angeles,

where it gained widespread recognition.

Fred said that he didn't give zoot-suited pachucos all the credit for the lowrider origin story, believing that many people in many places played a role in inventing the car style. But he confessed he has a zoot suit in his closet and wears it on special occasions. Whether the pachucos started it all or not, and whether they emerged first in El Paso or elsewhere, elements of *pachuquismo* have remained universally characteristic of lowriders, especially those who consciously celebrate the history of the subculture.

Though he declined my request that he model a zoot suit, Fred did offer me a ride in his '64. He rolled it out, put down the top, and we hit the streets of Española, cruising toward Holy Cross Church in nearby Santa Cruz. Out on the road, the motor thrumming and sunlight glinting on the perfect paint of the hood, Fred waved back at passersby whose heads turned to admire his ride.

Fred chose to drive to this church for a reason: The venerable edifice is a regional icon, representing Hispanic history and pride in much the same way that Fred believes lowrider cars do. From its beginnings, the lowrider style was part of Mexican Americans' effort to project a distinctive identity in American culture. Why cars? Because they're just about as American as apple pie. For Hispanic New Mexicans, you might say that lowrider cars are as New Mexican as Frito pie.

As we breezed along, Fred and I talked about his history with lowriders, which began when he was growing up, partly in Southern California. The trend blossomed in Los Angeles automobile culture starting in the 1950s and spread to New Mexicans through family connections. Fred caught the lowrider bug and brought it with him when he moved back home.



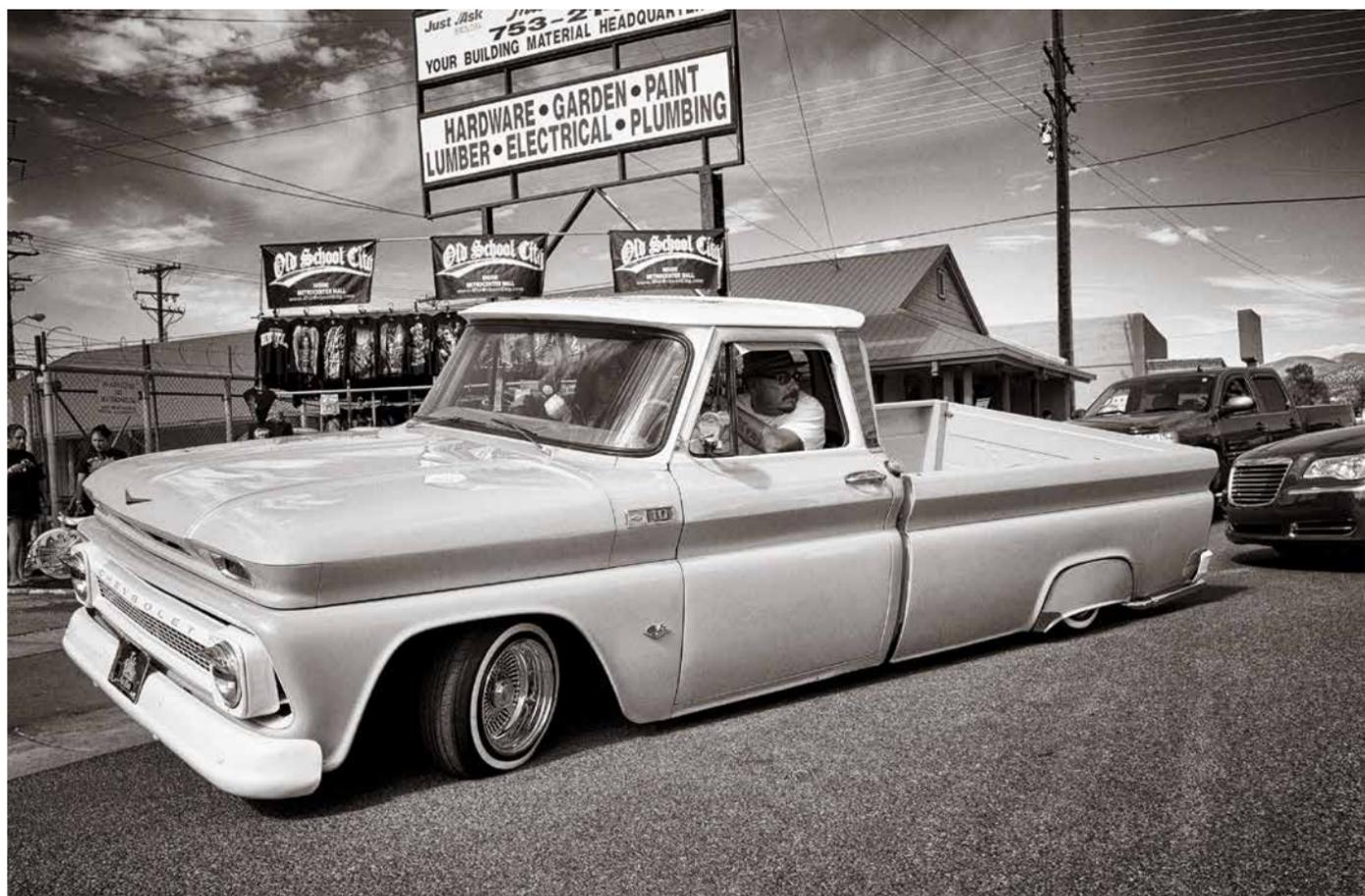
Heaven Chacón and Vanessa Gonzales of Chimayó. Facing page: The Chacón girls—Bobbie, Heaven, and Angel—with Pam Jaramillo in their '61 Impala.



*'LOWRIDER CARS ARE AS  
NEW MEXICAN AS FRITO PIE.'*



**Previous spread:** Mike Montoya applies a finishing touch for the 2012 MainStreet ShowDown car show in Española. **Facing page:** Chimayó's Johnny C. Martinez and Johnny C. Martinez Jr. with their prized '58 Impala. Riding low in a Chevy pickup at the Española car show.



Ideas and innovations had traveled back and forth between L.A. and New Mexico families for years. At first, the instructions were simple enough. You could lower, or “slam,” just about any vehicle, often by pulling out the rear springs or heating them up and compressing them. Sometimes this was done surreptitiously: Kids would pull the springs on the family car and go cruising for the evening, only to restore the cars to normal height when they returned home.

The look of a lowriding car, and the practice of parading down the road ever so slowly and stylishly, proved irresistible to many young Hispanics in L.A., northern New Mexico, and elsewhere in the West. Lowriders' popularity grew exponentially in the seventies and eighties.

In those early days, the process was relatively cheap. With a suspension drop and perhaps the addition of new rims, ordinary cars turned into lowriders. They were driven partly for show, but they were still utilitarian vehicles. “We drove them every day,” says Fred, “and we would paint them every year, so it didn't matter if we crashed them. If we got a scratch, a chip, whatever, we didn't even care because next year we were changing the color anyway.”

One of the most compelling technical inventions to come from L.A. was the ability to lower or raise the car at the whim of the driver. In 1958, Los Angeles outlawed cars whose frames or bodies were lower than the wheel rims. Facing this impediment to their favorite activity—cruising the streets, low and slow—guys employed in the aircraft industry adapted hydraulic pumps intended for raising and lowering wing flaps on airplanes to instead lift and lower cars. Lowriders were never the same. Vehicles that were “juiced”—equipped with hydraulic systems—could be dropped low to cruise the streets and quickly lifted back up to legal height when “the heat” came into view. Over time, hydraulics became more powerful—not only strong enough to raise and lower vehicles but also capable of making the front end jump as much as six feet off the ground. The lowrider hopper was born.

The California pipeline was a two-way street, and although hydraulics first appeared on lowriders in L.A., the so-called Godfather of Hydraulics, Orlie Coca, hailed from Las Vegas, New Mexico. He developed his own brand of hydraulics for lowriders in L.A. and organized the first car-hopping contests.

Thanks in part to Orlie's connections with kin and neighbors back home, hydraulics caught on quickly in New Mexico. Here, they held great appeal because they allowed the cars to clear obstacles on dirt roads. To demonstrate, Fred slowed at a speed bump on a paved

road, flipped a couple of the 10 switches on a small box between us, and the Impala rose a good foot or two to clear the bump. Another quick adjustment dropped it back almost to the pavement.

At the church, Fred showed me another reason that hydraulics excited so many lowriders. Parked in front of the adobe wall of the church, he made the Impala “dance” by working the switches in sequence so that one corner of the car jumped up, then another, before settling back to the low-crouching position to the sound of cheers and honks from passing cars.

After experiencing a performance like that, it's easy to see how lowriders caught on, especially among young car enthusiasts. But even as the number of lowriders grew, building and cruising a lowrider was still seen by many as an act of rebellion. Sometimes conflicts about lowriders divided families. I learned about that from Ray Martinez. When I first met him, Ray was at his garage in Chimayó, although I had already spent some time there with his son, Eppie, who has won accolades on the local and national scene for his prowess in building and “clowning” lowrider hoppers (making them jump crazily to unheard-of heights). Ray had built quite a gearhead reputation for himself, but as an old-school hot-rodder, his penchant is for speed. He wasn't too crazy about Eppie's early absorption with lowriders—especially after he gave his son the family's beloved '53 Chevy Bel Air.

“Thirty, forty years ago, when I gave him this car, I told him, ‘It's yours, *m'hijo*, as long as you don't abuse it,’” Ray said. “And sure enough, I went to Albuquerque one time and came back—and there's the car and it's lowered. He dropped the damn thing! And he did it without my permission.”

**B**y the 1980s, lowrider pride was expressed throughout Latino communities in more than just cars. The pachuco style morphed into a cholo identity, with zoot suits replaced by loose-fitting khaki pants, military belts, loose T-shirts, button-up flannel shirts fastened only at the top, and winos slip-on shoes. Some elements of the pachuco style, such as the fedoras and jargon, remained.

Many New Mexico lowriders sported the cholo look when the New Mexico Museum of Art sponsored a 1980 exhibit of lowrider photographs by Meridel Rubenstein, accompanied by a car show on the Santa Fe Plaza. The event recognized lowriders as artists in their own right—but perhaps more significantly, it focused on the people who built and owned the cars. Images of couples, elderly people, children, and families powerfully

## NEED TO KNOW

*Lowriders, Hoppers & Hot Rods: Car Culture of Northern New Mexico*, on exhibit through March 5, 2017, at the New Mexico History Museum. 113 Lincoln Ave., Santa Fe; (505) 476-5200; nmhistorymuseum.org

*Con Cariño: Artists Inspired by Lowriders*, on exhibit through October 9, 2016, at the New Mexico Museum of Art. 107 W. Palace Ave., Santa Fe; (505) 476-5041; nmart-museum.org

*¡Órale! Lowrider: Custom Made in New Mexico*, a reflection on the past 40 years of lowrider culture in northern New Mexico. To be published this fall by Museum of New Mexico Press. mnmpress.org

refuted the characterization that lowriders represented a scary fringe element of Hispano culture.

When I returned home from my own California hejira in the late eighties, I worked on a master's degree in cultural geography, concentrating on historic ways of life in northern New Mexico. Lowriders were on the periphery of my interest, but I couldn't help but notice how they'd changed. Their exteriors had become much more extravagant, with bright paints, multiple colors, extensive pinstriping, and metal-flake paint that made the cars sparkle. There were "candy" finishes, fade paint jobs, layered patterns. The lowriders used to be just low. Now they were dazzling and often showed off dramatic paintings, typically of religious subjects.

In 1990, Jack Parsons, Carmella Padilla, and Juan Estevan Arrellano published a book called *Low 'n Slow* that documented this stage in lowrider development and reaffirmed the cars as an important element of contemporary New Mexico culture. The book portrayed the vehicles as soulful artistic expressions, as Rubenstein had done. That same year, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., purchased the classic lowrider Dave's Dream, a 1969 Ford LTD created by Chimayó resident David Jaramillo, and put it on display in the National Museum of American History.

Two decades later, New Mexico museums have decided to revisit lowriders. This time, curators elected to include the work of many artists and photographers. The New Mexico History Museum's exhibit features over 100 photographs by 31 photographers, as well as a rotating series of four cars; the New Mexico Museum of Art is showing photography, video, sculpture, paintings, and prints. In association with the exhibits, the city of Santa Fe sponsored a May 22 lowrider car show on the Plaza, in a reprise of Rubenstein's celebratory show there 36 years ago.

As I began writing and helping with the exhibits, it became clear that things have changed since the publication of *Low 'n Slow*. Most obviously, the number of lowriders cruising northern New Mexico has dropped. Fred Rael attributes this to simple aging: "All of us lowriders, we've just gotten older. Back in the day, we could just work on our cars and cruise all we wanted. We didn't have much responsibility. Now, we've got jobs, our kids are in school. We just can't hang out like we used to."

Other lowriders attribute the decline in street cruising to other factors, pointing out that traffic and congestion are worse on streets that used to be ideal for cruising and that lowriders are deliberately blocked from some roads. Many have pulled their cars off the street and turned them into pure show cars. Also, the

increasing complexity and elegance in the art and craft of lowriding demands more money than ever before. Car owners aiming to compete may put tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars into a car. Paint jobs extend into trunks, around engines, and even onto the belly of the car. Chroming might extend far beyond bumpers and rims to include engines and undercarriages, with chassis covered in chrome or glazed with gold—down to even the nuts and bolts.

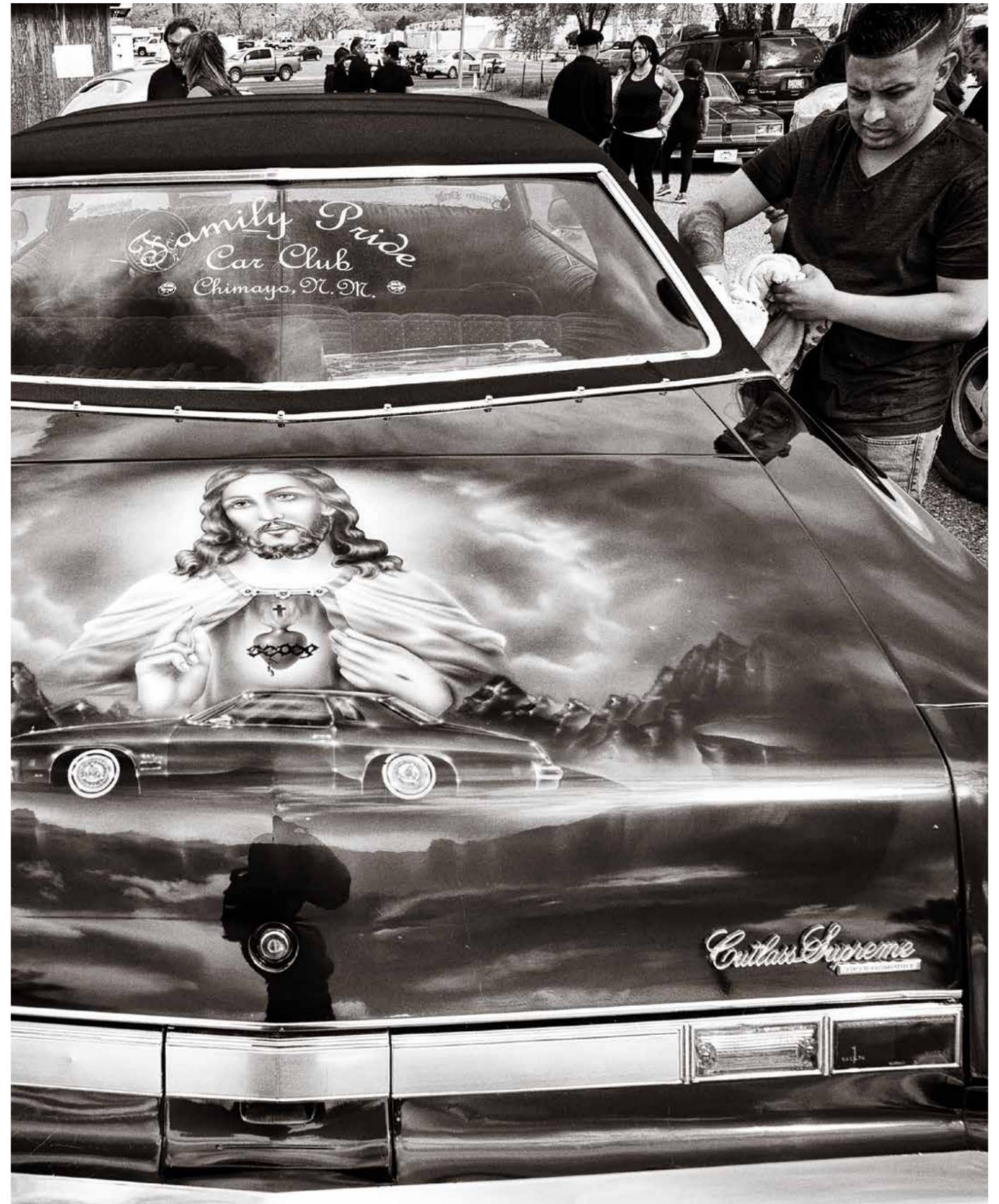
Lowrider hopping, too, has reached new heights, literally, with the front ends of competing hoppers lifting over 10 feet. The new trend of "bagging" cars—adding airbags that rely on compressed air instead of pressurized hydraulic fluid—makes raising and lowering cars easier and smoother and eliminates the need to carry heavy batteries for hydraulic systems. It's now possible for cars to "bunny hop," audaciously jumping up with all four wheels at a time.

Despite the ebb in their visibility on the street, my glimpses of the lowriders' glorious work at homes, garages, and car shows assures me that lowriding is alive and well in New Mexico. Today, it is an intergenerational pursuit, with family and cultural pride reasserting themselves in the design of each new steel-and-chrome invention. The cars may not back up traffic, but they still cruise into the car shows that happen just about every weekend somewhere in New Mexico. Besides lowriders, the shows feature hot rods, street rods, classic cars, oldies, custom cars, and other cherry examples of American car culture. Lowriders represent just one expression of the American love affair with the automobile, but they remain particularly emblematic of the Hispanic culture of northern New Mexico.

It's been a long, slow ride for lowriders since they cruised onto New Mexico's rough roads over 60 years ago, from being ostracized as so-called pachucos to earning respectability in some of New Mexico's most august institutions of art and culture.

When I think back to those first "pachucos in a lowrider" my sister fled from on the dusty roads of Chimayó some 50 years ago, I wish that they had offered me a lift. If they were anything like the lowriders who have since befriended me, they were probably just out for a cruise and meant no harm at all. I'm sure I would have loved their car. And who knows, the magic of lowriding might even have won me over at that early age. It surely captivates me now. ■

Contributor **Don J. Usner** is a teacher, writer, and photographer in Santa Fe. His books include *Valles Caldera*, *Sabino's Map*, and *Chasing Dichos through Chimayó*.



Facing page: Paul Montoya's Cutlass Supreme, with artwork by Randy Martinez.