

My Datsun and Me

Posted signs such as the one at right guided me to the large Tokyo meeting room where members of the All Nippon Datsun League and the Japan Datsun 510 Association would question me about my old Datsun stationwagon, which was standing idle in the garage at my Southern California home, waiting for me to return and take her out somewhere. I wasn't surprised when 94-year-old Yutaka Katayama, the legendary "Mr. K," invited me to meet with these young Datsun fans at NISMO headquarters. After all, it was my ancient Datsun, or more specifically an article I wrote about her in the *Los Angeles Times*, that brought Mr. K and me together. What surprised me was that all these Japanese Datsun enthusiasts already knew about my car. Which should not have surprised me at all. Only a couple of years earlier, my Datsun got grand exposure on five large Nissan screens at the 2001 Tokyo Auto Show, and the same video ran repeat-



edly for months at Nissan's Tokyo headquarters. I knew that, as did these Datsun fans. The video, entitled "Durability & Reliability," featured five Datsuns from several countries. Mine represented North America. Norio Matsumura, my friend and Mr. K's Nissan boss, had ordered a film crew to come to my Lake Forest home, where I was interviewed and my Datsun 510 was photographed. The photo below, showing me with the dear old car, was taken during the filming. Incidentally, Norio has been tabbed to replace Japan folk hero Carlos Ghosn as CEO of Nissan Motors. I am happy for him, but I fear I won't see him as often.



Photo by Masataka Usami



Firing-squad photos such as the one above are boring, of course, but I requested it on the pretense that my Datsun, a vain female, would want to see it. To me, the car has always been a woman, successor to a *macho* Buick Riviera that died suddenly in early 1972. In the photo, Mr. K and I are seated in the middle, and my translator, Takashi Kido, sits next to me on my other side. My Japanese is good enough for light chitchat, but woefully inadequate for

serious matters like Datsuns. Japanese Datsun owners are just as proud of their cars as I am of mine. Scattered on the table are memorabilia that these Datsun fans gave me. There was so much stuff that I had to ask Eiichi Shimizu, NISMO marketing manager, to mail it to the United States. At home, in my workshop, I spread it out and photographed it, as shown below. NISMO, I should explain, means “Nissan Motorsports International.”



Where Was She Born?

I didn't know the answer until very recently. A plate on my 1972 Datsun PL510 wagon says only that she was manufactured by Nissan Motor Co. in November 1971. Nissan friends enlightened me. All Datsun 510 sedans were assembled at the Oppama plant near Yokosuka, but station wagons such as mine were produced at the Hiratsuka plant on Sagami Bay. Both plants lie within Kanagawa Prefecture southwest of Tokyo.



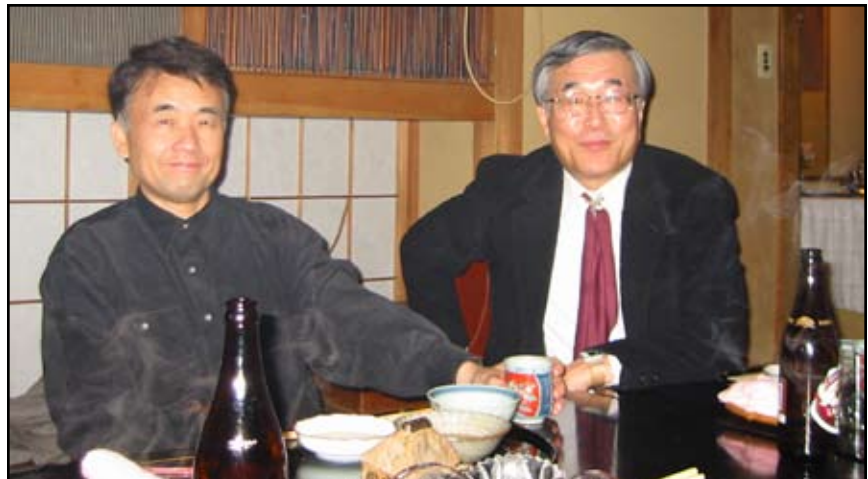
Takashi Kido, a Nissan employee and my translator for this event, shows off his immaculate Datsun outside NISMO headquarters. I was envious of the paint job. My Datsun was repainted 13 or 14 years ago, but she doesn't have the gloss that Kido-san's has. In my Datsun's defense, however, I can say that she looks almost exactly the same as when I bought her, still 100% standard, while most other Datsuns I've seen lately have been "improved," internally and externally. The only difference for my Datsun is her whitewall tires. In the beginning, the whitewalls were at least two inches thick, bold and impressive. Now they are puny, less than an inch wide. Thick whitewalls went out of fashion, damnit. You can still special-order them, at a cost of \$150 each, but I don't pamper my Datsun that much. She is a workhorse, suitable for carrying bricks, firewood, lumber and bags of garden humus, and she seldom gets a chance to show off in the presence of other old and preening Datsuns. That's all right. She is stupid and doesn't know the difference, and she thinks she is pretty the way she is.



Sukiyaki: Last Supper

Tomorrow we would go home to America. This was our final full day in Japan, and this was our last Japanese supper until we return as we always do. The top three NISMO executives took us to a little restaurant where *sukiyaki* was cooked at a low table in a *tatami*-floored room. Mr. K and I, the oldest of the five in the party, were grateful that the table sat over a sunken area providing sufficient room for our stiff legs. I didn't eat much. I was coming down with flu symptoms that would climax on the flight back to Los Angeles. I recovered about five days later.

A couple of nice guys at our Last Supper. Kazuo Hioki, at left, is a NISMO director and the general manager. Eiichi Shimizu, NISMO marketing manager, also serves as Mr. K's executive secretary. Mr. Shimizu endured a long day on my behalf. Starting very early on this Saturday, he chauffeured me around to various Tokyo historical sites having nothing at all to do with Nissan Motors.



Remarks Prepared by Jackson Sellers for NISMO Meeting, Tokyo, Dec. 6, 2003

I'm here today, on the last day of my month-long vacation in Japan, because Mr. K and Mr. Shimizu asked me to speak with you. I am a writer, not a speaker, so I generally avoid speaking. But I can't resist either of these gentlemen, so here I am.

Mr. Shimizu is a new friend, but I became acquainted with Mr. K three years ago, when I wrote a couple of little articles about my old Datsun. The articles appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*. To my utter amazement, I received more than 300 emails in response to these modest stories. One email came from someone named Yutaka Katayama, a name I did not immediately recognize. He complimented me on stories that brought back good memories, and identified himself only as “an old salesman struggling with a new computer.” But when I saw his email address — *mrk@drmteam* — I realized that this was the man who had started it all. I thought he was dead! Anyway, we have become friends. We dine together when I'm in Tokyo, we traveled together to the Nissan Oppama plant last year, I wrote a major *Los Angeles Times* piece about him and the 350Z, and it was my great pleasure to entertain him at a dinner party at my California home.

I purchased my Datsun 510 stationwagon in February, 1972, from Barwick Imports in Laguna Beach, Calif., about seven miles from my Lake Forest home. Shortly afterward, the firm became Barwick Nissan in San Juan Capistrano, which is 10 miles from my home. Nowadays my Datsun is serviced by Power Nissan in nearby Irvine. A 65-year-old mechanic named Turk always works on my car. The younger mechanics don't seem to know much about Datsuns.

My Datsun 510 wagon is not a pet. She is a workhorse, taking me to the office on weekdays and anywhere else I want to go. She has carried me 342,000 miles in the past 32 years. She has no name, but I always say “she” or “her” when talking about her. My Datsun is a filly, not a stallion. The Buick Riviera that I drove until early 1972 was definitely a stallion, but he died and I chose a little filly to replace him. I have never regretted it.

I fancy that my Datsun loves me, but a woman who loves a man can still be demanding. If nothing else, she craves attention, and will get it in any way she can. Only a few months ago, my Datsun's turn-signal flasher stopped working. When I wanted to make a turn, I had to flip the turn-signal lever repeatedly to alert drivers behind me. This was annoying, of course, and even a little dangerous because it diverted me from the main task at hand — making a safe turn in traffic.

So I drove the car to the Nissan dealership to buy a new flasher unit. It was not in stock and had to be ordered. For several more days I continued to flip the lever repeatedly while making turns. Then, on my way to work, I stopped to pick up the new flasher. I didn't have time to install it, so I just tossed it onto the passenger seat and headed for the office. At the very first corner after leaving the dealership, I flipped the lever once and the signal flasher started working again. I can only conclude that the little Datsun just wanted my attention, and once she got it, she was satisfied and began behaving as a good woman should. And now she has a spare flasher.

All the equipment on my old Datsun is standard — with one exception. About 20 years ago, while driving into Los Angeles from my home in Orange County, I bumped into the rear of a pickup truck that stopped quickly in front of me. The truck had a trailer hitch that stuck out like a spear. It went right through my grill and radiator. The Datsun, deprived of coolant and running a very high fever, limped several miles to a Mexican-operated repair shop. The only radiator available was over-sized for the Datsun, but it did the trick, and I was on my way again in short order. I believe my car likes her big radiator. She always ran cool, but now, with all that coolant for her engine, she runs especially cool.

In the same accident, the Datsun's original grill was damaged. I obtained a new one from the Nissan dealership, but a mistake was made. It was a grill for a later Datsun and did not have a "Datsun" logo. In those days I was not particularly interested in preserving the originality of my workhorse. The new grill fit nicely, so I installed it. As the years passed, however, the non-standard grill began to bother me. The car was attracting lots of attention, and I had to explain that she looked exactly the way she did when I bought her — except for the grill. But replacement of the grill seemed like too much trouble. Then, less than a year ago, I had a "*horidashimono*" experience. (I learned that word on this trip to Japan, and I can't resist using it here.) A young California 510 Club member, owner of a 510 sedan, was admiring my wagon. He also admired my grill. A trade was made. Now my Datsun looks EXACTLY as she should.

Except for the tires. Dammit, there's always something. When she was new, my Datsun sported white-wall tires — the ones with wide stripes, not the skinny little stripes on today's so-called white-walls. An Internet search showed me that a set of wide white-walls are still available — for about \$700. But that's too much for a plain ol' workhorse. (Don't tell her I said that. She might start blowing her tires until I relent and buy fancy ones for her.)

I have replaced her clutch three times, which means she is now using her fourth clutch in 32 years. When I told this to Masataka Usami, Mr. K's chief engi-

neer in the 1960s and '70s, he replied: "Only four?" Apparently the Datsun clutch is a known weakness.

Speaking of Masa, who lives just 10 miles from me, he and his wife Fusako accompanied me to Temecula on a hot day last August. I had been invited to bring my Datsun to a Z Car rally. Masa and Fusako followed me over the Santa Ana Mountains in their new Nissan car with its "Datsun" logo. As might be expected, Masa has a soft spot for Datsuns. I feared that someone might want to look into my car's engine compartment, so I had taken her to a car spa the day before, to get her first-ever professional engine cleaning. High-pressure hot water was directed into her engine compartment. A battery connector serving the starter broke loose. A young Mexican fixed it as best he could, and everything seemed okay, but after I arrived in Temecula, where my Datsun was put on the showroom floor, she wouldn't start. Masa fixed it with duct tape. "I can still fix Datsuns," he boasted. Several weeks later, Turk the mechanic fashioned a new cable for me, and didn't even charge me for it.

I wish I could say that everything works on the old Datsun, but I can't:

Radio — It worked nicely for 31 years. I often joked that it gave me only old music and old news. But last spring, as I was listening to Iraq War news on my way to work, the old AM radio issued a squawk and died. A burnt-out in-line fuse under the dash may be the reason, but I'm getting too old to contort myself to look for it. Maybe, if I'm nice enough to her, the Datsun will fix it herself. She loves me, you know.

Heater — It hasn't worked for years, but I believe there is nothing wrong with it. The linkage between the dashboard control panel and the heater has dropped off, and is probably still under there somewhere, doing nothing. It doesn't matter much. The car seldom goes outside sunny Southern California.

Twelve or 13 years ago I had my Datsun repainted. Same color, light green. After nearly two decades on California freeways, she had a couple of dozen dings on her thin skin. Today she looks pretty good — she goes to the car wash regularly and gets a waxing occasionally — but she is showing signs of needing another paint job. I'll wait until I retire to do that. When I go to the expense and trouble of making her perfect again, I want her to stay in my garage most of the time, out of the sun and clear of all those pebbles kicked up by trucks on freeways.

What will happen to her when I grow too old to take care of her. Maybe she will just stand in the garage, waiting for me to hobble out and pet her once in a while. She is much younger than I am and will easily outlive me. Perhaps I will sell her to someone who will love her. Lord knows there is no shortage of people who want to buy her. California 510 Club members salivate over her. Mexicans

seem especially appreciative. I can be tooling along on the freeway, and I'll hear a beep-beep from the adjacent lane. I look over and see a couple of Mexican dudes giving me thumbs-up signals. My trashman, my gardeners and other Mexicans are always asking if I want to sell her. No, I say, she's not for sale. But someday? Maybe someday.