

THE MONSTER GARAGE BRONCO

Words by Michael Thompson, photos by Andy Vaughn



WHAT HAPPENS AFTER TV?

PEOPLE ASK ME HOW I CAME TO OWN THE MONSTER GARAGE BRONCO. HERE'S MY STORY AND SOME HISTORY OF THIS INTERESTING RIG.

As many of you know, Monster Garage was a television series that aired weekly from 2002 through June 2006. It showcased a build team that had one week to convert a vehicle into some kind of "monster" rig that accomplished some predetermined goal. Episode 21 in 2003 featured a stock Ford early Bronco that host Jesse James and the build team would turn into a wild rock crawler. It ended up being a Viewer's Choice episode. My story covers what happened to the Bronco after it aired on television.

The show was popular and the Bronco crawler was well received by most. The purists moaned over chopping up an uncut Bronco and some of the wheeling enthusiasts criticized whatever they found wrong. However, there were also guys out there that took from this episode an idea of how they wanted to build their own rig.

It's not a show rig, it's a legitimate crawler.



Full hydro, King coilovers, Fox bumps...all the cool stuff.

As we all know, you can't build a hardcore rock crawler in six days and expect it to work flawlessly or be executed with impeccable fit and finish. Besides, it's a rock crawler! It's going to get beat up, right?

I don't have specific details of what was done to this Bronco immediately after the show, but it was brought to a big warehouse and sat there until 2006 or 2007. During that time, it was listed on eBay and various other sale sites. SDHQ in Gilbert, Arizona was hired to do some work on it but then it was sent back to the warehouse where it sat some more. Then, sometime in 2007 or so, John Pawlak from Texas bought it.

John spent a lot of his time and hard-earned money on this Bronco. He took tons of pics before, during, and after the work he put into it. John really did all the hard work to get this Bronco fixed so it could perform to the best of its abilities. He hired Frankie's Off Road in Rainbow City, Alabama to completely redo the suspension and the cage. I consider Frankie's to be a pioneer when it comes to suspension tuning for offroad machines. I can't think of a better place to take the Monster Garage Bronco. They stripped all the old cage work off and stripped the axles bare, then built a rugged truss and their best double-triangulated 4-link suspension front and rear. They also bobbed the Bronco frame right behind the front seats, then extended it back with 2" x .120 wall

DOM tubing. They rebuilt the cage out of 1.75" x .120 wall DOM.

After Frankie's got the rig functional John brought it back home. He had to rebuild the axles with ARB Airlockers and had a custom C4 transmission built by Art Carr in Texas. He built a hood by hand, and built a bumper for it that had a 15,000-pound Warn winch mounted to it. He even had all the seafoam-green Line-X removed from the panels inside and out and repainted the Bronco a dark marine blue.

After finishing it, he became more deeply involved in his racing hobby and sold the Bronco to Justin Bjork in Michigan. Justin is a Bronco enthusiast and loved this rig the moment he set his eyes on it. He owned it for about a year and decided it was way too much rig for the type of wheeling that was readily available to him. He made the decision to sell it on. A couple of months after he listed it for sale, I was in my garage looking at my 1976 Bronco thinking to myself, "Do I really want to cut this beautiful Bronco into pieces to turn it into an extreme rock crawler?"

A plan was developed. I'd sell my Bronco and use the money to buy another that was already built up. I got on the Internet, listed my Bronco for sale, and began my search for the ultimate early Bronco crawling machine. It didn't take long for me to find my next rig. There was never a doubt that Justin's Bronco was calling my name.

Interestingly, he was never told that his Bronco had a colorful past. A member on Classic Broncos brought it to his attention in his for-sale thread that it looked like the Bronco from Monster Garage, and he confirmed it with a phone call to John Pawlak.

I took a drive to Michigan from Washington to see this awesome machine. It was 2,000 miles one way, about 34 hours of driving. I was so excited, I drove straight there without an overnight stop. When I finally saw it in person, I was already making a list in my head of what I wanted to change to make it my own and to make it look like the Bronco that was built on the show. We hammered out a deal and I took my time getting back home.

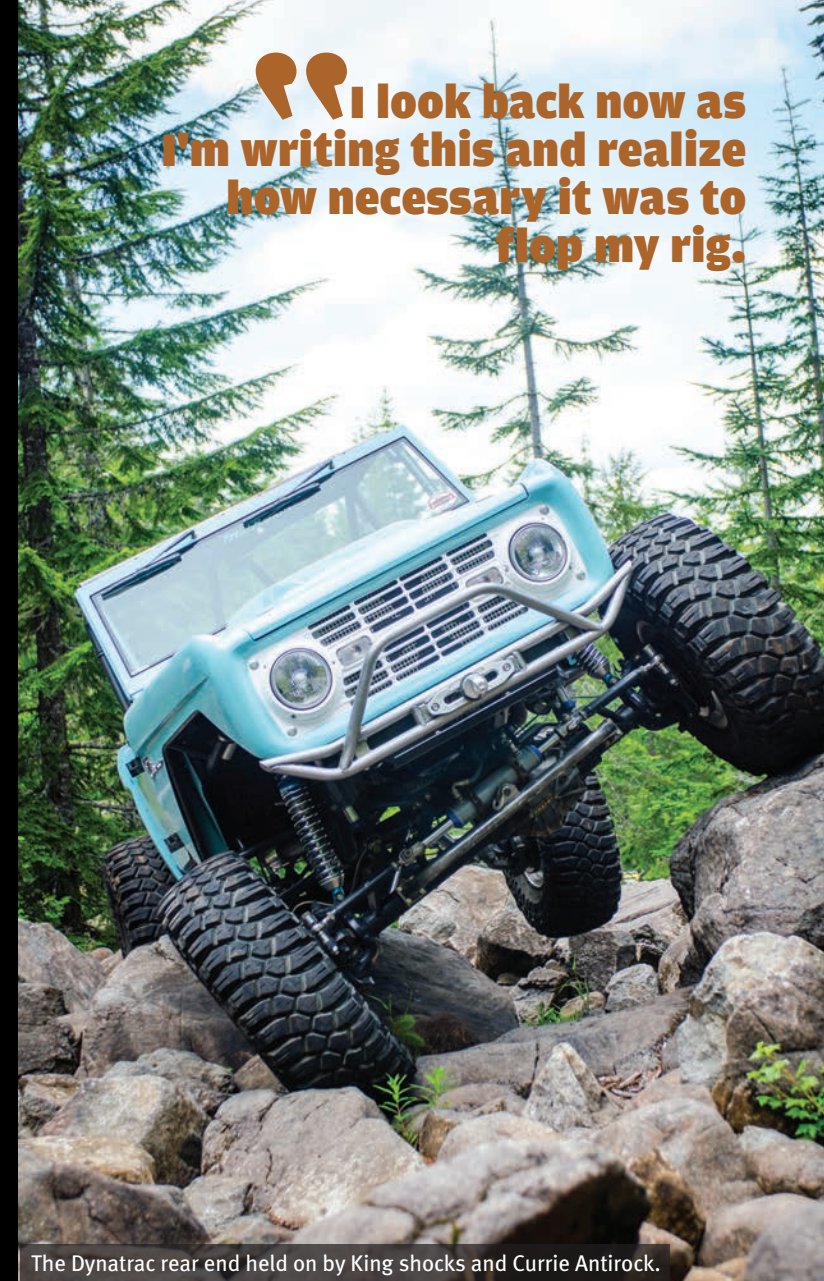
I didn't tell more than three people that I acquired the Monster Garage Bronco. It was early November 2012, and I wanted to build it right away before I showed all my friends. I kept it a secret and stashed it at my buddy's shop for three months. I tried to rebuild it before summer came but work and family kept me busy, so I decided to get it dialed in for a season of wheeling then tear it down the following winter for a big makeover. My first wheeling trip exposed a few big issues. I got those fixed and the rest of the year went pretty smoothly. I met a lot of awesome folks going to events, camping and wheeling. It was September of 2013, and I had one last camping and wheeling trip to go before I tore the Bronco down for its makeover. I had all the bugs worked out.



Full hydro, King coilovers, Fox bumps...all the cool stuff.

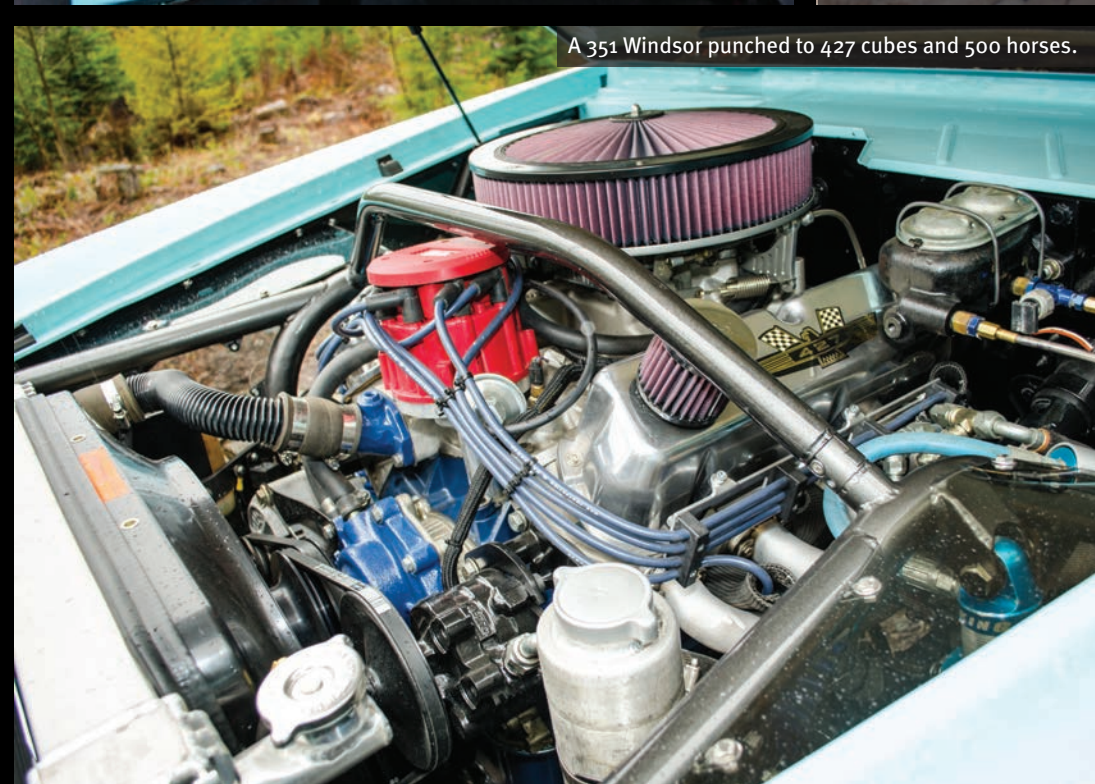


A nod to its past with a Monster Garage logo.



The Dynatrac rear end held on by King shocks and Currie Antirock.

I look back now as I'm writing this and realize how necessary it was to flop my rig.



A 351 Windsor punched to 427 cubes and 500 horses.



Steers in the front and the back.



Rear steer in the right hands keeps you out of the rocks.



The Dynatrac rear end held on by King shocks and Currie Antirock.



Panels are removable. Doors are swappable.



Nice packaging. Everything has a home.



The office. 12 Volt Guy panel and Autometer gauges.



The Anza beadlocks from Fuel look good wrapped in Maxxis rubber.

The coilovers were dialed in and she was running perfect. I got out to the campsite and some guys asked me if I'd like to go night wheeling. I knew the trails well and got to a familiar spot that is a fun challenge. Unfortunately, I chose the wrong line and got the rig in a jam. The nose was pointing straight down and the motor started starving for oil. I quickly decided to back up just a smidgen but in my haste I forgot to disengage the front axle. The rig tumbled over and landed on its top. By the time it was upright the whole front clip and windshield had been destroyed. I was a little upset that I crunched up the tins, but the doors, tub and rear quarters were unscathed, and I was already going to build a new hood and fenders. So I actually only needed to build a new grille. It still sucked though because it was the one piece that Jesse James built that I had wanted to remain on the rig.

I got the rig back to my shop and immediately started the teardown process. I look back now as I'm writing this and realize how necessary it was to flop my rig. All the creative juices to build it so it could handle the most extreme trails came from that experience.

I built a front clip out of DOM tubing for three primary reasons. I wanted to stiffen up and strengthen the front end, protect

the motor and other components, and I wanted to be able to pull all the tins off yet still have a body underneath them that could handle the most extreme rock crawling.

I had a custom dovetailed fiberglass hood built by JGZ, I finished fabricating the tub and had Line-X spray it with their premium bed liner.

I sold the 302 and dropped in a 427 Ford stroker motor. More power, more better.

I built a custom dovetailed front grill and fenders. Flex-A-Lite built a custom dual-bypass aluminum radiator with their matching electric fan and two-speed fan switch. Next was a custom front bumper, and tucked into it was a Warn 9000 winch, underneath the radiator. Classy Chassis built a custom Bronco gauge cluster with the Monster Garage logo laser printed onto the gauge face. Grafted to the rear quarters were new lower quarter panels. The old ones were welded on too fast, which caused the metal to warp. A custom rear light bar to hold big, bright brake lights and a 13" led combo light bar was added.

After sanding down all the panels, I prepped them with body filler and epoxy primer, and

epoxy primed the tube frame and all the tubing. I shot single-stage polyurethane on everything, black on the frame and steering column, frost turquoise on the body, metallic gray on the tubing, and white on the bumper and middle of the grille. Jason Lusier from Jason's Custom Compacts shot the color on all the panels and the dash and cowl.

The Bronco was scheduled to be at the big annual Moonshiner's 4x4 swap meet in March 2014, and if you saw the Bronco a week before the event you would have bet money it wouldn't have made it. I had a big stroke of luck though. My good friend Andy T. had the whole week open to help me get it finished. I also hired my electronics guru Todd Hanse with OBD Connects to come in the last week and get all the wiring redone. Between Andy and Todd, we got that Bronco done in time! There were tons of little details that made this Bronco come together, and if it weren't for the help of so many club members, I doubt it would be finished yet.

I think it's a cool part of Bronco history and is an extremely capable rig. I look forward to wheeling it all over the country. Who knows, maybe one day it will be in your neighborhood itching to wheel all the hotspots you know so well. <C>



SPECS

Owner Michael Thompson
Hometown Tacoma, Washington
Vehicle Type 1968 Ford Bronco
Builder Jesse James, John Pawlak, Frankie's Offroad and Michael

CHASSIS

Frame / Chassis Design	Stock modified
Frame / Chassis Materials	2 x 4" .250 rectangle, stock boxed 2.5 x 4.25" rectangle
Overall Wheelbase	105"
Overall Length	151"
Belly Pan Clearance	21"
Overall Height	78"
Wheel Track Width	87"
Overall Weight	Approx. 4,000 pounds

POWERTRAIN

Engine Make	Ford 351W block
Engine Displacement	427 ci
Engine TQ	500 lb/ft
Engine HP	500 hp
Engine Induction	Normally aspirated
Engine Modifications	Stroker kit
Batteries	Dual Optima Yellow Top
Radiator / Fans	Flex A Lite custom dual bypass radiator w/ 3300 cfm fan and 2 speed automated switch
Air Intake	14 x 3 inch K&N filter and 14" K&N filter top
Exhaust	Custom shorty headers, 2.5" exhaust into 20" stainless Magnaflow glass packs out to 2.25" stainless exhaust
Transmission Make	Ford C4 custom machined, fully rollerized, hardened shafts, Redline steels, clutches and bands, reverse manual valve body built in shroud
Transmission Cooling System	Derale remote mounted cooler
Torque Converter	12" caged made by OER, stock bronco stall
Transmission Shifter	Winters reverse manual gate shifter
Transfer Case(s)	Advance Adapters Atlas 4.3
Fuel Containment	12 gallon plastic fuel cell with foam and fuel trap

BODY / INTERIOR

Seats / Harnesses	Corbeau racing seats, Crow 5-point harnesses
Electronics	Custom wired by Todd Hanse with OBD connects
Lights Interior / Exterior	Rigid Duallys in front, Rigid 13" combo bar in rear, Xenon HID w/ Hella E-code housings
Safety - Fire Extinguisher	Two 2lb haltrons
Winches - Front / Rear	Warn 9000 in front tucked behind bumper
Extras	Lokar locking dipstick for trans and motor, quick latch hood fasteners, quick latch fasteners on front fenders and grille, Lexan tinted racing skins and inner tinted racing skins and inner fenders



DRIVETRAIN

Front Suspension / Type / Materials	Triangulated 4-link double sleeved heat treated chromoly heim joints 1.25" lowers .75" uppers
Front Shocks	King Racing 14" remote reservoir coilovers
Front Bump Stops	Fox 2.0 air bumps
Front Axle Housing	Dynatrac Dana 60
Front Differential / Locker	ARB Air Locker
Front Ring & Pinion / ratio	5.38:1 gears
Front Differential Cover	Dynatrac 1/2" cast steel cover
Front Axle Shafts	Dana Spicer 35 spline
Front U-joints	Dana Spicer
Front Drive Flanges / Hubs	Synergy drive flanges
Front Brakes	Dual piston GM 3500 truck calipers and rotors with Corvette master cylinder
Front Steering Setup	Precision Offroad Steering double ended ram, orbital valve and steering pump
Front Driveshaft	High Angle Driveline
Rear Suspension / Type / Materials	Triangulated 4-link double sleeved heat treated chromoly, heim joints 1.25" lowers .75" uppers
Rear Sway Bar	Currie Antirock
Rear Shocks	King Racing 14" remote reservoir coilovers
Rear Bump Stops	Fox 2.0 air bumps
Rear Axle Housing	Dynatrac Dana 60
Rear Differential / Locker	ARB Air Locker
Rear Ring & Pinion / Ratio	5.39:1 gears
Rear Differential Cover	Dynatrac 1/2" cast steel cover
Rear Axle Shafts	Dana Spicer 35 spline
Rear U-joints	Dana Spicer
Rear Drive Flanges	Dynatrac
Rear Brakes	Dual piston GM 3500 truck calipers and rotors with Corvette master cylinder
Rear Driveshaft	High Angle Driveline
Rear Steering Setup	Precision Offroad Steering
Tire Make / Size	Maxxis Creepy Crawlers 40 x 13.50 x 17 bias ply
Wheel Make / Size / Bolt Pattern	Fuel Anza beadlocks, 17 x 9, 8 on 6.5

BODY / INTERIOR

Body / Body Panels	Custom modified stock body panels front and rear, fully removable
Body Modifications	Front is narrowed 13", rear is narrowed 15"
Skid plate / Material	Belly pan 1/2" T1 hardened steel, winch skid .25" cold rolled steel
Painter Name	Jason Lusier at Jason's Custom Compacts
Hood / Grille	Custom hood by JGZ in Colorado. Grille by Michael Thompson
Floors / Firewalls	Shaved floors, custom tunnel and bulk head, stock firewall and cowl
Dash / Gauges / Switches	Custom switch panel by 12 Volt Guy, Autometer gauges
Steering Column / Wheel	Stock steering column with TBP 14" wheel
Pedal Assembly / Cutting Brakes	Front and rear manual micro-locks