



# BOLTS FROM THE BLUE

*Enrico Nardi became more famous for crafting beautiful aftermarket steering wheels, yet his forays into building cars included these two astonishing show-stoppers of the 1950s*

WORDS Richard Heseltine / PHOTOGRAPHY Phil Toy





**T**HERE WAS NO BUSINESS plan as such, no intention of creating replicas. By the time the Nardi Blue Ray was unveiled at the 1955 Turin motor show, making cars had become a marginal activity for the man who conceived it. Enrico Nardi had tried hard to establish himself as a car manufacturer, yet found greater fame making mainstream production cars go very quickly. That, and by producing supremely elegant steering wheels. This flight of fantasy marked the beginning of the end. Nardi had all but given up on his dreams of becoming a motor mogul in favour of the aftermarket.

Except the Blue Ray – or *Raggio Azzurro* as its maker christened it – led to another Lancia-based creation, the Blue Ray II. If not quite the marque's last gasp, this similarly leftfield device was built at the behest of a persuasive American businessman, the USA featuring prominently in the Nardi narrative. Yet to file both cars in that catch-all 'etceterini' category would be to do them a disservice. In both instances, there was substance beneath the surface flash.

Enrico Nardi was born in Bologna on 31 January 1907, although his family was of Torinese stock. Engines fascinated him from an early age, young 'Rico' being more interested in taking them apart than completing his coursework. Legend has it that he changed school eight times in one year, and he earned a degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Turin – aged 34. However, he had by that point established himself as a gifted test driver and troubleshooter. Following a spell with Fiat, he joined Lancia in 1930, where he soon attracted the attention of the great Vincenzo Lancia. After initially working on commercial vehicles, Nardi took on greater responsibility within the firm, helping to develop models such as the Ardena and Astura.

In 1932 he created his first car, a twin-cylinder JAP-powered single-seater, in conjunction with school friend Augusto Monaco. It would be campaigned with intermittent success to '37, a year after Nardi left Lancia to join Scuderia Ferrari. He was taken on as a test driver, but soon became adept at multitasking. One of his many jobs was to hop-up a Lancia Aprilia for Pier Ugo Gobbato, the son of Alfa Romeo general

manager Ugo Gobbato. Nardi and Gobbato Jr went on to finish 37th in the 1938 Mille Miglia aboard this lightened and re-profiled saloon. However, that same year saw Enzo Ferrari exiled from the team he created, Nardi moving over to *Il Commendatore's* new business, Auto Avio Costruzioni, which was primarily focussed on manufacturing machine tools and aircraft components. Predictably, Ferrari soon returned to competition, fielding two AAC Tipo 815s in the 1940 Mille Miglia. Nardi rode shotgun with Rangoni Machiavelli in one, and they led the 1500cc class by 33 minutes before being forced out with engine failure.

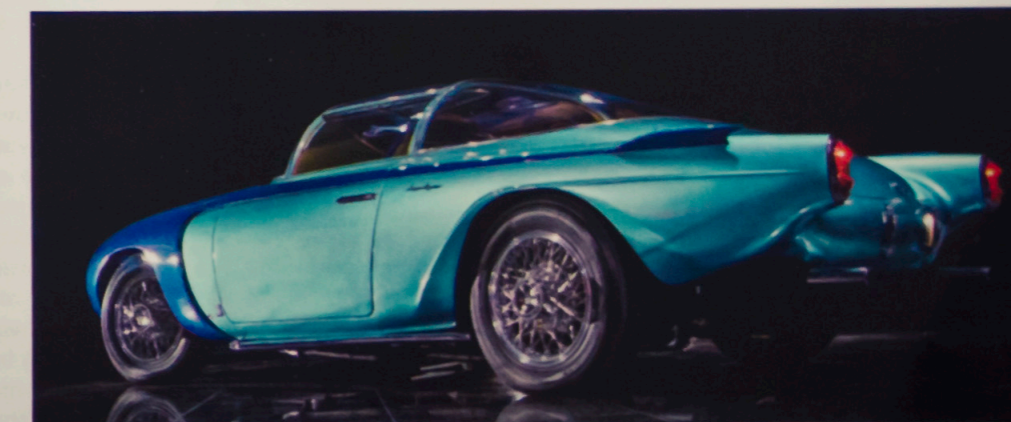
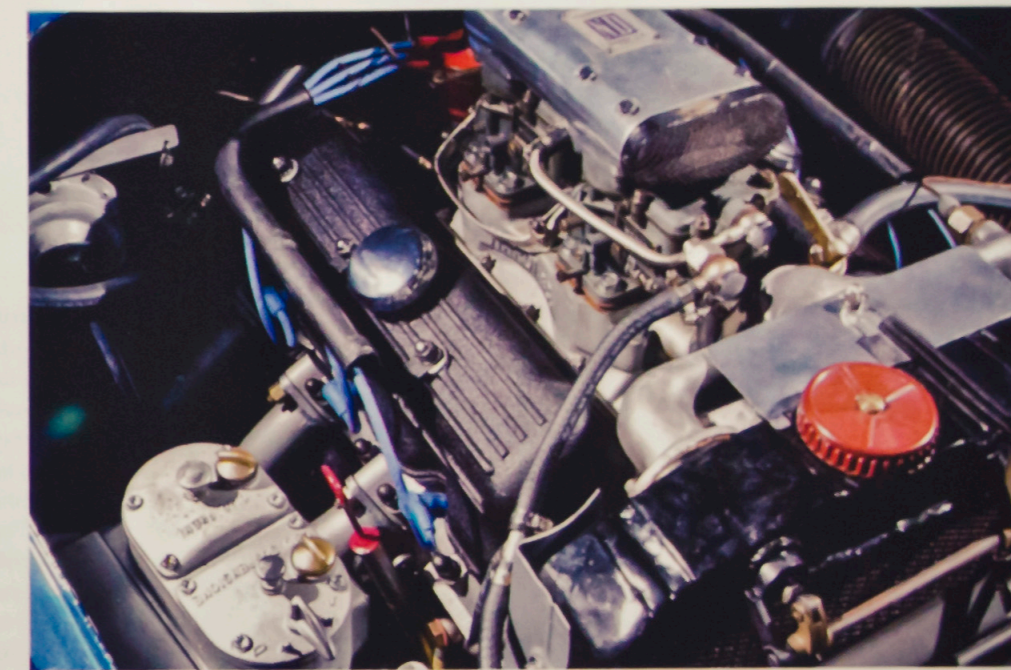
Post-war, Nardi helped establish Ferrari's eponymous marque, yet he left Modena for Turin at the end of 1946. From a small hangar behind the Lancia works in Borgo San Paolo, he joined forces with Roman amateur racer Renato Danese to produce his own brand of racing car. Danese took care of commercial operations while Nardi was responsible for design and manufacture. Nardi Danese – or ND – created its first car based around a BMW twin, the R75 motorcycle being commonly found in army surplus yards. It was a hand-to-mouth existence manufacturing cars as one-offs

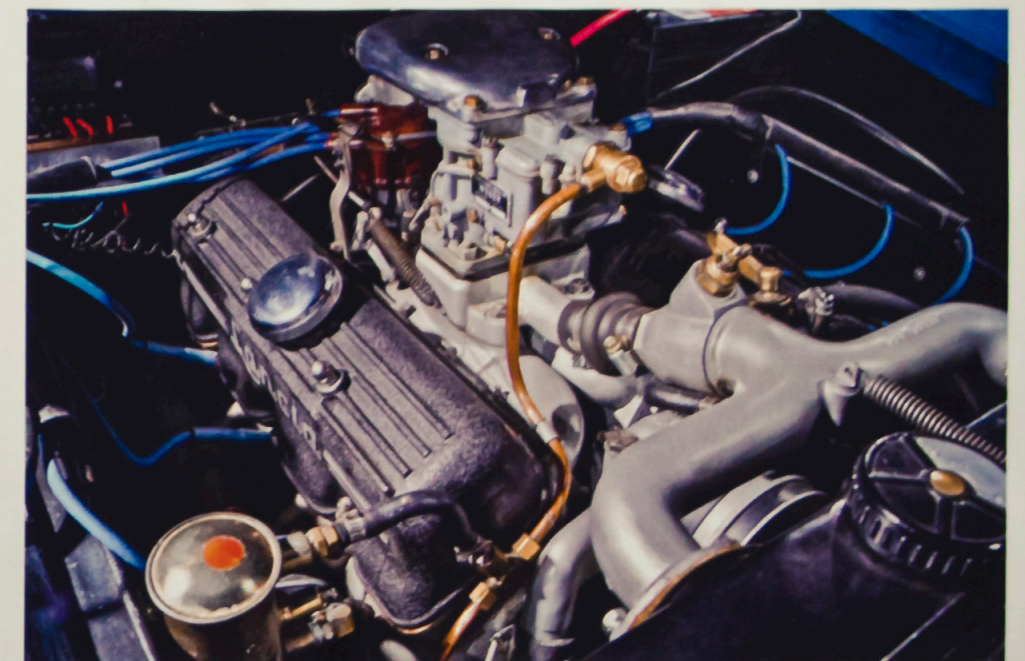
## 'WITH ITS BLUE-TINTED PERSPEX GLAZING, THE BLUE RAY WAS THE JET-SET DREAM MACHINE'

or in small batches, and relations between the partners ended amid acrimony in 1949, the split occurring just as the firm began offering a line of intake manifolds for Fiat 500s and Lancia Aprilias, the first Nardi steering wheel going on sale in 1951. The newly reminted Nardi & C would garner considerable popularity for its go-faster gear, with the likes of Antonio 'Tony' Pompeo and John Edgar doing much to promote the Nardi name trackside in North America.

'Rico' went on to produce a bewildering array of cars, from skimpy motorcycle-engined →

Left and below Blue Ray featured a radical fighter-jet-style canopy with a huge dome of blue-tinted Perspex, while the aluminium panels clad a tubular structure. Mechanicals came from Lancia, with Nardi upgrades.





sports cars and F3 single-seaters to luxuriously equipped roadsters for Italian aristocrats. He employed the best coachbuilders of the day, from Allemano to Zagato via Bertone and Boano. However, the profit-making aspect was rarely factored in. From the mid-50s, car-building gradually took a back seat – but not before Nardi devised a new show-stopper to promote his flourishing tuning business.

Work began on the Blue Ray in September 1954. The basis for this brave new world was a tubular frame that had been designed for a stillborn Carrera Panamericana contender. It followed the dimensions of the Lancia Aurelia B20 from which it borrowed its sliding-pillar front suspension and de Dion rear end. The car's 2.5-litre V6 was breathed on by the master, tweaks including a hotter cam and twin Weber 40DCZ5s on a Nardi manifold, the four-speed transaxle featuring one of his popular floor-change conversions. According to the period press, the Blue Ray produced 190bhp at 5500rpm, which was perhaps a mite optimistic, as was the claimed top speed of 140mph. Clothing the ensemble was a body crafted in aluminium by Alfredo Vignale to a design by his friend, Giovanni Michelotti.

The car broke cover at the October '55 Turin motor show, sharing space on the Carrozzeria Vignale stand with the equally outré Fiat 8V-based 'Demon Rouge'. Michelotti had thrown just about every styling fad of the day at the Blue Ray, and most of them stuck. The lofty V6 necessitated an elevated bonnet, while the waistline tapered towards the rear. The bonnet scoop was mirrored with a roof-mounted item, and the large central headlight, dual-cowl windscreen arrangement and two-tier tail-fins represented pure show-car theatre. Finished in two-tone blue, with corresponding blue-tinted Perspex side and rear glazing, it was every inch the jet-set dream machine.

Following its Turin debut, the Blue Ray rounded out the year at the Paris motor show. In February '56 the car was sold at the New York Auto Show, having served its purpose as a promotional tool. Nardi was by then besieged with interest in his handsome wood-rim steering wheels, and car production was limited to selected small-bore racers and an attractive Vignale-penned, Fiat 600-based coupé that looked destined for production in Spain by Seat, only to become another Nardi product that fell before it could thrive. By the

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late-50s, the marque was dormant save for a couple of private commissions from the USA.

One such approach came from an American customer who had been enamoured of the original Blue Ray show-queen. Vignale and Michelotti were roped in to help realise his vision, toning down some of the more excessive aspects of the prototype's styling: the double-bubble windscreen arrangement was junked in favour of a more conventional item,

Above and right A private client ordered the Blue Ray II from Nardi, who based it around a modified Aurelia B20 chassis, clad this time in steel rather than aluminium. Aurelia mechanicals featured again, though the engine was less highly tuned than in the original.

and the roofline was more angular than before. If anything, the new strain bore a closer resemblance to a Vignale-bodied Lancia Appia that appeared at the '56 Turin motor show.

Fitted in an Aurelia B20 Spider chassis with a heavily modified centre section, Blue Ray II's V6 featured a single Weber 40DCZ5 carburettor on a Nardi manifold. Bodywork was in steel rather than aluminium, finished in the same two-tone hues as its forerunner's, and the completed car was unveiled at the March '58 Geneva motor show before being shipped to the USA, where it has remained ever since.

There would be one final hurrah for Nardi the car-builder, Blue Ray I having been acquired by Miami businessman William Simpson in early 1959. He paid \$8500 for the privilege. Simpson was so smitten with his new toy that he approached Nardi to build him the ultimate GT car. Nardi was initially reluctant but in time agreed to construct a →



**1958 NARDI BLUE RAY II**  
 ENGINE 2451cc V6, OHV, one Weber 40DC25 carburettor  
 POWER 141bhp @ 5500rpm TORQUE 127lb ft @ 3500rpm  
 TRANSMISSION Four-speed manual transaxle, Nardi floor-mounted shift, rear-wheel drive STEERING Worm and sector  
 SUSPENSION Front: sliding pillar, coil springs, telescopic dampers. Rear: de Dion tube, Panhard rod, semi-elliptic springs, telescopic dampers  
 BRAKES Discs front, drums rear  
 PERFORMANCE Top speed 124mph

**1955 NARDI BLUE RAY**  
 ENGINE 2451cc V6, OHV, two Weber 40DC25 carburettors  
 POWER 190bhp @ 5500rpm TORQUE 152lb ft @ 3500rpm  
 TRANSMISSION Four-speed manual transaxle, Nardi floor-mounted shift, rear-wheel drive STEERING Worm and sector  
 SUSPENSION Front: sliding pillar, coil springs, telescopic dampers. Rear: de Dion tube, Panhard rod, semi-elliptic springs, telescopic dampers  
 BRAKES Discs front, drums rear  
 PERFORMANCE Top speed 140mph (claimed)

Michelotti-styled coupé powered by a 6.5-litre Plymouth Golden Commando V8. The *Raggio d'Argento*—or Silver Ray—was delivered to its expectant owner in September 1961. Though there would be at least two more designs trumpeted as Nardis, this was the last car designed and built by the company founder.

The mid-60s would witness a boom period for Nardi & C, with the firm producing around 2000 steering wheels per year, Ferrari being among its most valued customers (Enzo himself suggested that his former employee should engrave his name into the alloy spokes). Unfortunately, Enrico Nardi didn't get to savour his prosperity. In 1964 he was diagnosed with leukaemia. He died two years later, aged 59. His wife Edgarda and daughter Roberta attempted to keep the business afloat, but the rudderless firm soon foundered. The Spanish subsidiary, Nardi Espanola, went into liquidation in 1967, the principal business being sold off three years later.

Enrico Nardi built around 60 cars, encompassing a wide array of competition-orientated hardware. But of all the assorted designs in his back catalogue, the Blue Ray show cars are arguably the most memorable. Jim Simpson undoubtedly thought so, the Texan having fallen in love with Blue Ray I on first seeing a picture of it in a magazine in the



Top and above  
 Side by side at the Blackhawk Museum, with Blue Ray I on the left; Blue Ray II at the 1958 Turin motor show.

early 1970s, when he was just 14 years old. Scroll forward through a Lancia Fulvia Zagato Sport restoration and the 18-year-old Simpson went for broke, using his new-found contacts in the Lancia world to track down William Simpson (no relation) in Florida. He then took his first-ever commercial flight to go and see him and what he believed was the original Blue Ray, only to discover that it had been sold several years earlier; William Simpson now owned Blue Ray II. Remarkably, the teenager was able to acquire the car. What's more, he learned the whereabouts of Blue Ray I, which

belonged to an Atlanta lawyer, and Simpson went to see it on his way back to Houston. A year later, he owned both Nardis.

Jim Simpson went on to establish his own restoration business, and revived both cars, even using Blue Ray I as his daily driver for two years. The Nardis were displayed together publicly for the first time at the 1989 Pebble Beach Concours d'Élégance, before being sold. They now form part of the Blackhawk Automotive Museum collection, sharing space with Franco Scaglione's Alfa Romeo BAT aerodynamic studies and Virgil Exner's Mercer and Bugatti show-cars.

Enrico Nardi never became a major player as a car-builder, but he was a collaborator and foil to some of the biggest names in motoring history. Through enterprise and pluck, he built a multi-faceted business in post-war Italy, his steering wheels garnering fame far beyond the nation's borders. In many ways, the Blue Rays were mere footnotes in Nardi history but they remain major draws for anyone besotted with Italian coachbuilding artistry. Show-cars may have been a means to an end for Nardi, but those ends more than justified their means. *Out*

THE BLACKHAWK AUTOMOTIVE MUSEUM is in Danville, California. [www.blackhawkmuseum.org](http://www.blackhawkmuseum.org).

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