

SCANDINAVIAN CONNECTION

by Tom LaRocque

In the late 1970's, at a ski resort near Duluth, Minn., Keith Lennartson's first Saab was ticketed for illegal parking. The color of the car was listed on the citation as "Swedish racing green."

"I took it as a joke—a play on 'British racing green,'" says Lennartson. Something about Saabs seemed to be anti-antagonistic, even during tough economic times when "foreign cars" were just a bit politically incorrect. Along with the U.S. auto industry, northern Minnesota's Iron Range was somewhat depressed at the time. Non-American-made cars weren't always a welcome sight.

"People knew Saabs; they knew the inherent quality."

L E N N A R T S O N

But his neighbors seemed to accept and respect Lennartson's 1975 Saab 99 LE, in part because of their own largely Scandinavian lineage, he says. "People knew Saabs; they knew the inherent quality." Duluth was home to more than its share of Saab aficionados, owners, and mechanics.

Lennartson, himself of Swedish heritage, worked at a Spirit Mountain ski resort, and drove daily over treacherous ice and snow. "I really appreciated that

you could turn the floor mats upside down and use them for traction," he says. Later he was employed by a stereo retailer. "We were hauling equipment to a new store, in a blizzard. The other guys all drove Broncos and pickup trucks, but my car was the only vehicle that could get through that day." The experience cemented his relationship with the car.

Coincidentally or not, Lennartson ended up employed by another Scandinavian company, Bang & Olufsen, of Denmark. He is director of communications for the company's U.S. subsidiary, based in suburban Chicago. Maker of fine high-end stereo and home-entertainment equipment, Bang & Olufsen shares much, in its design approach and work ethic, with Saab. Both companies are unafraid of being unconventional.

"A lot of products are just a twist on an existing platform, but a few companies will take an idea apart, turn it upside down, and see what it can be." An example is Bang & Olufsen's BeoSound 9000, a standing CD player in which all six discs are visible to the listener, not enclosed in a box.

"We call it an inline six," he says. With the unit programmed to choose tracks randomly, a roving playhead zips from disc to disc at speeds approaching "zero to sixty in less than five seconds."

Automotive analogies appear in much of B&O's advertising.

Lennartson's second Saab was an '85 900 Turbo, bought used in 1991. "My wife, Dawn, who ordinarily couldn't care less about cars, got really attached to it. We drove long distances, and we sold it with



Surrounded by Scandinavian flags at the Bang & Olufsen U.S. headquarters near Chicago, Saab owner Keith Lennartson admits that "pride of heritage" has had some influence on his car and career choices.

185,000 miles on it. The people who bought it were overjoyed."

His third and present Saab is a '96 900 Turbo, with a stock stereo and optional six-disc changer. "I love the car. I'm impressed with the sound quality of the stereo, which is important to me," Lennartson commented. "Also, our two little towheads (sons Erik and Karsten) look great strapped into the back seat." The Lennartson family owns two vehicles. One-year-old Karsten calls one "the car," and the other "the Saab."

"You can buy a Point-A-to-Point-B car, based on consumer ratings, or whatever," Lennartson said. In fact, Saab's high ratings have played a part in his own purchases. But for an acquisition as personal as a car, or a high-end stereo, emotional factors should be at least equal to the cold, hard specs. He continued, "Aside from pride of heritage, both Saab and Bang & Olufsen appeal to me in the same way. They are small, thoughtful companies with innovative products that make a statement about the designers who created them, as well as the people who buy them. The products have tremendous style, but they remain practical and purposeful."



Lennartson has a passion for products that are beyond the conventional.