

National

Plush buses newest status symbols

Entertainers take to the road in style

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — A tearful Tammy Wynette passed crisp \$100 bills to the crew and then mannequined the wheel to drive her new \$250,000 touring bus out of the garage.

It was Wynette's second custom-made bus — complete with a four-poster brass bed. Climbing airline fares — particularly on short-haul flights — have caused more and more entertainers to take to the road again.

The cash-rich entertainers ride in style. Their homes away from home are luxurious. The "Black Beauty," a custom piece of green vinyl, is just sold for use in the Rolling Stones' tour, boasts a remote-control color television-videotape deck, a stereo system, a microwave oven, a trash compactor, a mobile telephone, a \$13,000 stereo system and a computer bar that does not shoot of bourbon, gin, whiskey, vodka and scotch. It sleeps up to 12 and there is a "state room" for the group's star, Mick Jagger.

"We want you to be as comfortable in one of our buses as you would be sitting in your own home," said Jerry Messier, a former cabinet maker who left California four years ago to build buses for the Music City Manufacturing Co. of Nashville. "We use any materials we can to make the bus

more plush. Expense, of course, is usually not a consideration."

Burt Reynolds just accepted delivery of his \$400,000 custom masterpiece, but unlike most entertainers, Reynolds plans to use it as a dressing room on the set of his new movie, "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas."

"Burt's like a kid with a new toy," Wayne Charleton, the firm's business manager, said.

The company, owned by David Jackson, was formed in 1962 to make the most popular version of the pedal steel guitar — Sho-Bud. The guitar company was purchased in 1979 by Baldwin Piano Co., forcing Jackson to look to other ways to use his expertise in metal fabrication and cabinetry. He turned to custom buses.

Wynette, Reynolds, John Conlee and T.G. Shepherd have purchased buses. The firm has leased buses to other stars, including Kim Carnes, Bruce Springsteen, Johnny Paycheck, Loretta Lynn and Mel Tillis.

Reynolds' bus is the most expensive bus ever made by Charleton and his crew. It only sleeps one, has a dressing room and makeup room, hand-laid stone tile, a brass sink and air brush artwork covering every piece of wood.

Messier said Reynolds decided to get the bus after seeing one

owned by Dolly Parton.

"It's a status symbol for many of these entertainers," he said. "Burt saw Dolly Parton's bus and loved it. She planned to use her bus on the set of the movie 'The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas.' Universal Studios was just going to give Burt a trailer."

"He said, 'Wait a minute, I'm the star,' and decided to get us to build him a bigger bus."

"Reynolds wanted a jacuzzi or a hot tub in his bus, but we talked him out of it. That might present a problem with the floor collapsing or the bus shifting weight suddenly."

"Burt didn't want to be cramped in his bathroom. He wanted to make sure his knees didn't touch his chin."

Charleton said Reynolds' showpiece bus already has brought the firm more clients.

"The Robert Redfords — they're not going to let Burt Reynolds get ahead of them," Messier said.

Charleton said his firm is currently working on a voice-activated computer that, on verbal

command, would start the engine, turn on the lights or crank up the stereo. The price of the computer is about \$20,000, he said.

The company's sales depend on word of mouth. "We have no vast sales organization," Charleton said. "The only sales we do is answer the telephone."

The buses are purchased from American Eagle Manufacturing Co. in Texas for about \$130,000 and then brought to the garage in Nashville for renovation.

Messier said: "(The bus) comes with the engine and driver's seat. Then we customize."

It takes six to seven weeks to turn an empty 40-foot-by-7-foot shell into a plush bus. Depending on the job and the depth of the entertainer's pocketbook, interior designers, artists and other advisers may be called in.

"I won't build a formica-type bus and my boss won't either," Messier said.

Charleton said airplane fare hikes, the gasoline crisis, the discontinuation of Amtrak rail service in the Southeast and the air controllers strike helped "sway enter-

Brady makes return

White House visit

WASHINGTON — A mysterious James Brady, with President Reagan at his side, returned to the White House press room in a wheelchair Monday and, displaying his customary wit and warmth, told reporters: "I miss most of

His return to his former bailiwick was the first official visit Brady has made to the White House since being shot in the March 30 attempt on Reagan's

The presidential press secretary was on hand for the formal dedication of the newly refurbished press room.

Brady gave the thumbs-up sign as he was wheeled in and said: "It's nice to be back. Hello, good friends."

Reagan told the gathering: "Jim Brady is my press secretary." Turning to Brady, he said, "Jim, we're all waiting for the day when you are back for good."

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