

JADA

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FROM LOWRIDERS TO HOT RODS - A DIECAST SUCCESS STORY

Just seven years ago, Jada Toys entered the diecast marketplace, and it has since become one of the industry's most recognized brands. Jada's outrageous styling and innovative designs have a wide appeal and have thrust Jada's name onto every diecast enthusiast's radar. Although best known today for brazenly styled and highly customized vehicles, Jada Toys' first diecasts were rather mundane.



"We design and we create a product
"Just collect **what's cool**" for car lovers," says Luis.

JADA SUCCESS STORY



Entering the already crowded muscle-car field was risky for Jada Toys, but the unique Big Time Muscle line turned out to be a huge success.

After founding the company in 1999, owners Jack and May Li's first release was a 1:24-scale '53 Chevy tow truck called "Thunder Tow." Though that was a success, Jada didn't really take off until designers Luis Tanahara and Kevin Thaxton joined the company. I sat down with them at Jada Toys' headquarters in City of Industry, CA, to learn the history of this fast-growing company and to find out where it's heading.

After a brief stint at Mattel, Luis joined Jada Toys in 2001 during a time when the "Dub" craze—putting 20-inch and larger wheels on lowered cars—was just taking off. Luis took Jack Li around to car shows and introduced him to this burgeoning scene. He then pitched the idea of creating a line of diecast customs based on a virtual city—"Dub City"—in which all the vehicles would have 20-inch wheels and other customizations. The Dub City line was phenomenally successful and put Jada Toys on the diecast map.



Jada's first diecast was no indication of the direction in which the company would go when joined by a few Hot Wheels designers. But this 1953 Chevrolet did get Jada's name into print.

Not long after he joined Jada, Luis convinced them to hire his friend and fellow designer Kevin Thaxton. The two developed a synergy that spawned several other innovative lines. Typically, Luis develops the vehicles, and Kevin designs the graphics that give them that unmistakable Jada flair.

Like many designers, Luis and Kevin began by sketching their ideas as a hobby. Luis drew his earliest sketches for local mini-truck clubs. When he and Kevin met in high school, they got into air-brushing, and their collaboration grew from there. Though they never thought they'd end up in the diecast industry, they enjoy the freedom it allows them: "You're able really to do stuff you can't do in real life because of design parameters. In diecast, you can do that and get away with it," says Luis.

The entire process begins with ideas hand-sketched on paper. To streamline the process, the ideas are digitized

and modified on a computer. Recently, a new process has been added in which the two-dimensional drawings are converted into three-dimensional CAD renderings. This allows the designers to get a better idea of how their designs will look before they make a physical model.



One of Jada Toys' latest lines, D-Rods, takes the hot-rod scene to a new level of customization.

Once the three-dimensional CAD model has been finalized, a clay model that allows for major design changes is created. Then, a hand-carved resin model is formed. Minor adjustments can be made to the resin to some extent before the first metal version is produced. The metal version allows the designers to make small adjustments to the parts fit and to deal with any mechanical problems. An updated painted version is then created. Once the painted version gets the final go-ahead, the design is sent to Jada's Hong Kong factory for production. While this is happening, the packaging department works on eye-catching packaging that often includes

other collectible items such as trading cards.

Since the early days of Dub City, Jada Toys has developed several other diecast and also remote-control lines. Its current line-up includes about a dozen lines. Chub City—a youth market version of Dub City—

is one of Jada's latest incarnations of the Dub scene. Chub City features vehicles with outlandishly large wheels and a cast of "characters" that live in a virtual city. Chub City has a website where fans can get background information on their favorite characters and download wallpapers, comics and videos.

Jada Toys has expanded beyond the realm of modern vehicles and now produces customized versions of classics, muscle cars and hot rods with its OldSkool, Big Time Muscle and D-Rods lines. Entering this market, which is largely dominated by Johnny Lightning and Hot Wheels, was risky, but Jada thinks it



It takes a team to create the unique "Jada look." Here's the entire Jada design team with their customized Scion tC show car.

can pull it off. By giving the vehicles what they call the "Jada look," the company has been able to differentiate its products from the rest of the market. These lines are highly successful and have helped Jada to earn the respect of many traditional diecast collectors, especially those who want something different. "We design and we create a product for car lovers," says Luis. "Just collect what's cool," adds Kevin.

The import market is too hot to ignore, and Jada offers several lines for lovers of even the most obscure imports. Its highly customized Import Racer line has evolved into Option D, which is dedicated to the wildly popular drifting trend. These models feature adjustable camber and popular aftermarket modifications. In a similar vein,

Jada's Initial D line is based on the anime cartoon by the same name about drifting and street racing in Asia.

Jada Toys has some rather unusual lines. Its latest—Donk—debuted at the New York Toy Fair. A Donk is a '70s or '80s American sedan (think Chevy Impala and Oldsmobile Cutlass) that's raised to accommodate wheels that are too large for the wheel wells. The Homie Rollerz line is dedicated to the urban underground theme. The models feature customized designs of vehicles that are popular with the Latino community and include "Homie" characters.

Jada Toys' aspirations are high. Although it now produces diecasts that follow the latest automotive trends, it aims to become one of the main innovators in automo-



Jada Toys cashes in on the popularity of movie and TV show vehicles. This diecast 1963 Cadillac is from the movie "Scarface" and includes a Tony Montana action figure.



Jada Toys' line of Chub City characters appeal to a younger group. Chub C is featured here with a Chrysler 300C—an exaggerated version of designer Luis Tanahara's own car.

bile design. "We want to have the auto industry look to us.

We don't see it as [following] a trend; we see it as what's next," says Luis.

Whether you're into imports, classics, hot rods, Dubs, or any other vehicles, you can be assured that Jada Toys will be at the forefront of whatever does come next—in diecast and beyond.



The OldSkool line combines classic cars with modern customizations.