NHRA fans are thankful that free-spirited John Force has been the face of drag racing for many years. In addition to being the sport’s most prolific champion, Force has projected a larger-than-life personality that has helped enhance the sport’s mainstream popularity.

But a generation or so ago, spectators were similarly entertained by another charismatic racer: “Jungle Jim” Liberman. As did Force, Liberman rose from humble origins, and his underdog status helped make him the most popular Funny Car campaigner of his era.

Liberman campaigned his Jungle Jim entries for more than a decade, from 1967 until his untimely fatal highway accident in 1977. Being an independent racer, his cars were not nearly as fast as the entries of his factory-backed rivals, and he scored only one NHRA national event victory as a driver, but the impact of his dynamic personality was so strong that he was voted number 17 on NHRA’s Top 50 Drivers list in 2001, nearly 25 years after his career ended.

A visionary who was years ahead of his time, Liberman realized that he didn’t have to outrun his opponents to succeed — he just had to put on a better show, and he did with his patented fire burnouts or full-track smoky burnouts, after which he would drive back to the starting line in the other lane.

Longtime East Coast race promoter and publicist “Berserko Bob” Doerrer said, “He had a way of making all of this look very spontaneous, and it drove the fans wild. But ‘Jungle’ had all of this very carefully planned with larger fuel and water tanks built into his car. There was a definite method to his madness.”

This and much more led drag racing observers to believe that Liberman was the John Force of his era.

Inevitable comparisons

Longtime announcer Bob Frey, who worked at many East Coast tracks during Liberman’s heyday, said, “Liberman was the only driver who came close to John Force’s popularity. He was a blue-collar guy, and you wanted him to beat all of the factory teams that existed at the time. Whether he was on time or late, won or lost, he was still the most popular guy at the track. Nobody cared how well he ran because just having him in the pits made the whole show better.”

Clare Sanders, who drove Liberman’s second team car to victory at the 1969 Winternationals, said, “The comparison between ‘Jungle’ and John is a great parallel. They both had the same outrageous personalities and spontaneity. I worked on Jim’s crew while his second car, which I was going to drive, was being built, and we were at a match race in Suffolk, Va., one night, and he caught me totally off guard when he said, ‘You know, I’ve never seen my car make a run. Why don’t you drive it tonight?’ I put on my firesuit with his helmet goggles, and we beat Malcolm Durham that evening with a new track record.”

Force’s crew chief Austin Coil, one of Liberman’s best friends, said, “Let’s just say that everything that Jim did back then, John would do today if they’d let him. The long burnouts have always been a part of John’s act, but I don’t think NHRA would be too keen on fire burnouts.”

Said Doerrer, “[Liberman] was a maniac, and everybody loved him. He was always playing his harmonica between rounds, and after the race, he’d invite fans to his pit area for a party. At any given time during the match race season, there would be six to eight racing ramp trucks at ‘Jungle’s’ house in West Chester, Pa. It seemed like all of the other racers gravitated toward him.”

As does Force, Liberman always focused on the big picture, and he depended on others to take care of the details.

Said Sanders, “John Force has surrounded himself with very talented people to run his cars, and with ‘Jungle’, it was our job to make sure that we had enough parts to last through a week’s worth of match races and keep things organized. ‘Jungle’ was always dreaming up new things to try, and that contributed to his habit of arriving at the track late. He’d still be working on his car as his rig traveled through the pits.”

Frantic schedule

Liberman’s unprecedented popularity created so many match race dates that he was constantly on the road.

Said speed shop owner Steve Kanuika, who sponsored Liberman went on his own in 1967 with his first Chevy II, which, like many other Funny Cars of its era, was built from a production steel body. This entry is generally credited as being the first Chevy-powered Funny Car to run in the eight-second zone.
Liberman and allowed him to work out of his shop, "We'd see him race on Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, and on Monday he'd usually head up to Canada for another date. And these were not just local events; he'd be in Indy one night, Long Island [N.Y.] the next, then on to Maryland, Ohio, and across the border for his race in Canada."

Said Frey, "He absolutely overextended himself. At one track, after he had been late a couple of times, they finally locked the gate on him. What made him great also created problems, but most of the times he got away with it, and track promoters didn't care whether his car showed up with another driver. His name was just so big."

Coil equates Liberman's busy schedule with Force's similar hectic pace in recruiting sponsors and dealing with the media.

Said Coil, "We always have meetings at the races with our sponsor representatives, and they are usually interrupted by requests for television interviews. Doing the reality television show [Driving Force] this year has made it even crazier."

Mechanical skills

If there was one area in which Liberman and Force differed, it was in Liberman's ability with a wrench.

Said Coil, "John will be the first to tell you that he can't work on a car, but I was amazed at what a fabulous, hard-working, and innovative mechanic Liberman was. He'd warm up the car all by himself without anybody sitting in it. He'd whack the throttle with the car sitting on jack stands, then walk around to make the necessary adjustments. He really was a one-man show. He once built a running race car from a pile of tubing in just 18 days, and he even did the lettering.

He had tremendous talents with anything that could be done with his hands."

Said Sanders, "We were racing in Aquasco [Md.], and one of the guys staying at 'Jungle's' house was Chevy Funny Car racer Steve Bovan, who at the time was having trouble making his car run well. 'Jungle' felt benevolent and gave him a tune-up for the race, which Bovan went on to win. "When I won the Winternationals in 1969, 'Jungle' was there to tune the car for me. After my win, he couldn't have been more thrilled because the victory made me more attractive for match race bookings with our second car. After the race, he said, 'We really hit a home run with this one,' and he told me and [sponsor] Steve Kanuika to take a couple of days off to go to Disneyland."

Said Kanuika, "Jim was pretty much self-taught, and he learned a lot from watching Top Fuel racers. He traveled the country with an open ramp truck, well before anyone had enclosed tractor trailers, and he rebuilt most of his engines under the lights of a motel parking lot. What he did was pretty amazing."

How about today?

A lot of speculation has been made on how the free-spirited, impulsive Liberman would have done in

Liberman raced during an era when competitors made their money in match racing, so consequently he did not attend many national events. Nevertheless, Clare Sanders drove Liberman's Chevy II to a Funny Car victory at the 1969 Winternationals (left), and Liberman won his only major title at the 1975 Summernationals (below).
Though the independent Liberman couldn’t compete with such factory-backed teams as the Ramchargers and the highly feared Mercury Comets of Don Nicholson, Eddie Schartman, and Jack Chrisman, his flamboyant personality attracted a larger following. Said Liberman of his faster opponents, “I don’t have to beat them, I just have to put on a better show.”

today’s more restricted corporate climate, and the opinions of his close acquaintances are remarkably divided.

Said Frey, “It would be just conjecture on my part, but I don’t think he would have enjoyed today’s environment very much. There were some guys who just wanted to put on their T-shirt and go racing, and that’s pretty much what Liberman was like.

There’s people today like Connie Kalitta who have sponsorship backing with companies like Mac Tools, but Connie is financially independent enough to where he still races his own way. I just couldn’t see Liberman going along with all the extracurricular activities that a corporate sponsorship requires.”

Said Bob Gerdes, who painted many of Liberman’s cars, “I don’t think he’d like it today. Once when I was at his house, he had an appointment with some people from Toys ‘R’ Us, and when it was time to go, he decided to pull out the grill and cook us a steak. I don’t think he liked being tied to a schedule and do what you have to do now for a major sponsorship.”

Said Kanuika, “It’s really hard to predict what would’ve happened because the 1970s were so different, but I can tell you that when we put our speed shop name on his cars, it really paid off for us. We went from one store to six between 1968 and 1976. We gave him a little bit of money, the use of our shop, and some parts. He had the Revell sponsorship, but that was more exposure than cash. It was nothing like the Budweiser or Castrol deals of today.”

Others, like Doerrer, believe things would be different.

“I really think that he would’ve gotten along with today’s sponsors,” said Doerrer. “Right before his accident, he had put together a deal with 7-Eleven, and the people there really loved him.”

Said Coil, “Liberman put together the 7-Eleven deal that eventually went to Billy Meyer following his accident. When the family went through his mail after the funeral, there was a letter from 7-Eleven that said they wanted to proceed with the deal. I think he would’ve adapted. You have to remember that Liberman was only 33 when he died. John Force was probably a lot wilder at that...
age, too, but John has mellowed out over the years, and I think the same thing would’ve happened to ‘Jungle’ if he had lived.

‘Jungle’ a media star?

Liberman performed his quarter-mile magic in an era long before the advent of instant replays and 24-hour sports coverage. Force, with his spontaneous personality, has thrived in the expansive era of the media spotlight, and the success of his Driving Force reality television show has increased his visibility as a mainstream star.

But those who witnessed the drag racing scene of the 1970s certainly can remember that the star of the early attempts at video promotion was Liberman and his iconic proclamation of “drag racing is f-a-a-a-a-a-a-r out,” and there are certainly many reasons to believe that Liberman’s charisma would have thrived in today’s electronic age. ND

Liberman was the first Funny Car team owner to run more than one entry. In addition to Sanders, other drivers included Roy Harris, Pete Williams, Russell Long, Jake Crimmins, and former partner Arrington.

(Above) Adding “Jungle Pam” to his entourage in the early 1970s gave Liberman’s already spectacular match race act a new dimension. (Below) Liberman was only 33 when he died in a head-on highway collision Sept. 9, 1977. His brief and meteoric career will always be one of the brightest moments in drag racing lore.