

Inside One Man's Six-Figure 'Back To The Future' DeLorean Time Machine Business

Former radio host Adam Kontras built a rental empire . . . out of a DeLorean. But is the clock about to strike on his lucrative business?

By Daniel Terdiman

There's a seminal moment early in 1985's *Back to the Future* when Marty McFly, played by Michael J. Fox, is as dumbfounded by the fact that his friend Doc Brown has built a time machine as he is by the time machine's base material.

"Wait a minute, Doc," Marty says incredulously, "are you telling me you built a time machine? Out of a DeLorean?"

Brown, played wonderfully by Christopher Lloyd and sporting a head full of wild, silver-white hair and a white jumpsuit with a radioactivity logo, doesn't hesitate. "The way I see it," he responds passionately, "if you're going to build a time machine into a car, why not do it with some style?"

The same could be said for launching a small business, which is just what Adam Kontras, a Hollywood-based former radio host, did in 2014 when he borrowed a bunch of money from his mother-in-law—"never a good idea"—to buy, yes, a DeLorean.



Adam Kontras and Lea Thompson (Left) Photo: courtesy of Rent the DeLorean

Kontras was no dummy. He knew how to read a calendar, and his was signaling a great opportunity to make bank on a ton of imminent and inevitable *Back to the Future* hype. After all, in the sequel to the 1985 film, Marty and Doc

flash forward to October 21, 2015, and countless fans of the films were beginning to get very worked up as that date approached.

That's why he risked marital strife to borrow and plunk down an initial \$21,000 to buy a stock DeLorean, and an additional \$40,000 to \$45,000 for all the intricate modifications it took to pimp out his new ride as a nearly perfect replica of Doc Brown's time machine.

People wanted a piece of *Back to the Future*, and he wanted to provide it by renting them his car. His fortune was right in front of him.

It came, too, and far faster than even Kontras expected. In less than a year, he went from the uncertainty of plunking down money for a standard DeLorean in early 2014 to a six-figure business as 2015 (and reservations) came rolling in.

From \$500 birthday party bookings to high four-figure, multiday corporate gigs for clients like Toyota, Samsung, the Los Angeles Dodgers, the NFL Network, and more, they came, and never more than over the past few weeks, as October 21, 2015 fast approached.

There's just one problem: October, 2015 may be an idea, a state of mind, to the biggest *Back to the Future* fans, but in real life, it's just a month on the calendar. Fandom is fickle, and come November, even Kontras knows a lot of that business is going to dry up, almost as fast as it appeared.

Faithful Replica

Kontras owns only one replica *Back to the Future* time machine, but his company, Rent the DeLorean, has come to be something of a national clearinghouse for the vehicles. Thanks to his savvy use of search engine optimization tools, people all over the country who want to rent one often end up on his site.

For a small cut of the deal, he frequently brokers gigs for DeLorean time machine owners in other parts of the country. As long as they did a good job building their time machines, that is.

"In the whole country, there are probably 10 that are legit," Kontras argues, recalling one that he worked with that was of "questionable" quality—one he "can't put out on a job again."

Like R2-D2 builders who are fierce about making droids that pass muster among unforgiving colleagues, the DeLorean time machine community is competitive and obsessive about accuracy. You can't just throw in substandard parts and expect to get respect among people who don't blink at spending \$3,500 on working time circuits, \$1,500 for just the right 1979 coffee grinder to use as a Mr. Fusion, or \$900 for a screen-perfect flux capacitor.

"You have to find someone who has all those parts," Kontras says, "or collect them yourself, or hire a prop maker to make something that looks close."

Others, too, are in the business, and it's no surprise that October 21 is a big day for anyone with a converted DeLorean. In fact, Verizon has just teamed with Lyft on a promotion in New York where riders can call for a *Back to the Future*-themed car. For that project, Verizon contracted directly with private DeLorean owners through the Mid-Atlantic DeLorean Club

Fortunately, there's a blueprint for those wanting to play the time-machine game.

In total, seven DeLoreans were employed during filming of the three movies, but just one, known as the "'A' hero," was used throughout the series. After nearly disintegrating on Universal's lot over more than two decades since filming ended, that vehicle was "painstakingly restored" in 2010, providing those who would seek to copy it a wealth of source material from which to work.

DeLorean Time Machine at Universal Studios Hollywood.

You've got to be careful about how deep down the rabbit hole you go, Kontras admits. Even the most fervent *Back to the Future* fan will likely be blown away more by the way the DeLorean's doors lift like a bird's wings than by the accuracy of the car.

"You can drive yourself crazy on the little details," he says. "I learned that once I was through the process of making it, I had to stop the obsession if I wanted to make any money."

Case in point: There's a heat sink on the back of the time machine. It should be metal, but it's possible to get one in a resin that looks exactly right.

"I know a guy," Kontras says, "and he likes to point it out, like, 'I've got one that's metal, and you don't.' As a businessman, you have to go, 'I don't need that.' Half the time, [just] opening the doors freaks people out."

Origin Story

Kontras has long been a showman. After working in radio, he ended up building a mini-golf course in his backyard, and had hosted charity events there, bringing in the occasional celebrity.

For one event early last year, he worked with Claudia Wells, who played Marty McFly's girlfriend Jennifer in the original *Back to the Future* (but who was replaced by Elisabeth Shue for the sequels). Kontras asked Wells to connect him with the owner of a DeLorean time machine, but it turned out the guy had recently sold it.

Kontras wondered why somebody would be stupid enough to sell a DeLorean time machine in 2014. "If I had one, I bet I could make a lot of money," he remembers saying to himself at the time.

So he got one and soon discovered the reality doesn't always immediately match the vision.

"Last year, I wasn't sure I was going to make it [because] I couldn't get enough gigs," he recalls. "Then 2015 happened, man. The clock struck midnight, and on January 1, the emails and texts started to come in because all these news stations did stories on [arriving] in the future."

Those stories were manna from heaven. Suddenly gigs were materializing left and right, with clients demanding he bring his car to trade shows, parties, weddings, and everything in between.

It may have been a pipe dream in the beginning, but Kontras says he's already doubled his investment. But the gold rush that was 2015 could never last forever.

"After October 31, [business] falls off a cliff," Kontras admits. "I think the beginning of 2016 will be okay, will be better than 2014. But then, yeah, I do believe it dies down."

For much of this year, his DeLorean has been a full-time job, and provided a full-time income. By next year, though, Kontras knows he's going to have to come up with something else. While he expects a certain amount of "passive income" from bookings, the post-2015 future doesn't look so promising, particularly because the demographics aren't so attractive.

"This is bad for my business to say it," Kontras says, "but I keep getting high school homecoming dance [gigs] booked by people my age. Then the kids get there, and they're like, 'What the hell is this? Why are all these wires [on this car]? We are hitting a generational divide where kids don't know' *Back to the Future*."

Make A Grown Man Cry

Since it's clear his DeLorean time machine isn't going to make him rich in the future, Kontras knows he has to look for other reasons to keep the business going.

To be sure, even a small number of gigs, worth \$500 or \$600 each for just a few hours' work, probably warrants keeping the doors open. Then there's the reactions he often gets.

He remembers one job where a wife had hired the car as a surprise for her big-time *Back to the Future* fan husband. "He comes outside, and there I am with the time machine," Kontras recalls. "Those 10 minutes blew his mind. He sat down and cried. He felt like the movie came to his house."

Dealing with the many nerve-wracking frustrations that come from running a business like Rent the DeLorean can make you "jaded," Kontras said. "But you do a gig where you make a grown man cry, and you remember, 'Oh, yeah, this movie meant a lot to people.' You get out of your head and you remember how special it was."

"We Don't Need Roads"

Clients aren't the only *Back to the Future* fans affected by the car. Kontras himself very much knows that once upon a time, the movie was magic, even though—after sitting through 35 screenings this year alone—he's gotten to where he doesn't want to see it again any time soon.

Thanks to his business, though, he's become friendly with some of the film's stars, and his DeLorean has afforded him access to places he never would have gone otherwise and provided once-in-a-lifetime "life moments you didn't think would ever happen."

One was driving the time machine onto the USS Midway, a decommissioned aircraft carrier turned tourist attraction in San Diego. Another was driving Leah Thompson—who played Marty's mother in the films—into Dodger Stadium. "Who wasn't in love with her?" Kontras says. "It was so cool."

More recently, Positron, an L.A.-based creative agency, rented the time machine for a virtual reality experience it made for Tesla. In it, viewers are able to see the DeLorean race a Tesla, the new "car of the future."

Jeffrey Travis, Positron's founder and CEO, says it was "really fun when [the car] pulled up outside our offices. We'd been talking to [Kontras] for awhile, and we hadn't seen it until the day of filming. It was like being a kid again, being all giddy."

Travis was impressed at how much attention to detail Kontras put into the car, noting that you can punch dates into the time circuits, the flux capacitor looks like it should, and more. "Pretty much everything you expect to see is functional," he said, and the car drew crowds wherever they went.

In fact, he added, "all the cars around us [on the freeway] would slow down and cluster around it."

Now, Kontras is teaming up with Positron on another project: building a richer VR experience around the time machine.

Universal Studios used to have a *Back to the Future* ride, but not long ago shut it down, replacing it with a *Simpsons* ride. But the studio created a video of the ride, and Kontras and Positron plan on using it as the basis for the VR experience, which anyone who rents Kontras's car starting sometime next year will get, free of charge.

Strapping on an Oculus Rift headset, clients and their guests will be able to go through the ride even as they sit in the time machine's driver's seat. "They'll be able to . . . drive the car and fly back in time," Kontras said. "Usually when you're in VR, you can't touch anything. This is a type of VR where you're in the car, so you can grab the steering wheel."

The hope is that this added extra will drive a little more business his way. And, hey, maybe the enthusiasm for *Back to the Future* won't die down as quickly after October as he expects. But probably not. This year was a "six-figure year, and that's crazy," he says. "I have to assume it'll be a quarter of that" next year.

For now, Kontras hasn't figured out how to replace that six-figure income, and he has to, as his two kids and mortgage are very real. He hasn't yet found the road to the next thing.

But as Doc Brown would say, "Roads? Where we're going, we don't need roads."