

The Creative Workshop

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South Florida's renowned facility for show-winning sports car restorations



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Feature Article from Hemmings Sports & Exotic Car

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Changing careers can be a risky move, yet it can also open the door to a whole new world of exciting opportunities that you just may find to be far more rewarding, and challenging, than you ever thought possible. Careful planning and a desire to succeed are the keys to success, but you won't find out unless you try.

Back in 2001, Jason Wenig needed a change, due to the not-so-rosy future of the faltering dot-com company that he was working for, and decided to pursue his dream of restoring classic sports cars. Prior to that, he had been an advertising executive in New York City. Looking down from his second floor loft where his office is located, he told us, "What got me transitioned into this world--besides being a bona fide gearhead who bleeds oil--was, after I left my advertising position at an agency, I took a position as marketing director at an Internet startup dealing with car parts. I was deep in the professional car world for a while--sponsoring top fuel dragsters and such--which only fueled (pun intended) my love of cars. Well, the Internet start-up didn't really 'start and run,' so I was out there."

With the weather in his native Brooklyn not ideally suited for him, he and his wife, Kim, decided to sell most of their belongings and pack what remained in a U-Haul and move to sunny Florida. Knowing well that he needed a sizable facility to perform all the necessary tasks required of a self-sufficient restoration shop, he bought a 1930s-era granary building in the town of Dania Beach, just south of Fort Lauderdale, and opened for business in August 2001. The building is made from old-growth local pine, with wood floors and exposed wood beams, making it a warm and cozy place to work.

Now, after nearly 13 years restoring old cars, Jason and his staff of 13 dedicated and talented craftsmen have earned an outstanding reputation for restoration excellence that always seems to exceed their customer's expectations. This isn't hyperbole. First Class wins at the Amelia Island and the Boca Raton Concours, along with many 2nd and 3rd place awards at both, several firsts at the Lake Mirror Classic and the Keeneland Concours, several Platinums at the Ferrari Nationals and Cavallino Classic, two third place awards at Pebble Beach, and other wins at the Hilton Head and Palm Springs Concours attest to the ability of the Creative Workshop's staff to produce some of the finest restorations the collector car community has ever seen. Their client base now expands beyond the Florida border, with customers based throughout the U.S., Canada, Britain, Germany, Colombia and the Cayman Islands.

When I asked Jason what the main focus of his business is, his answer was an interesting one: "It's forensic concours restoration of rare, exotic and one-off vehicles. That is where we shine, where hardcore research and tenacity are required. It's equal parts brain and ability. We also coachbuild and do custom prototype car work, and handle production-based collector cars as well."

Inside his 10,000-square-foot shop resides everything needed to restore, rebuild, fabricate and paint that a concours restoration project requires. The main floor is where the disassembly and assembly take place, with each car getting its own storage units for the parts that come off it so they don't get mixed up with other cars' parts. The outer portion of the shop is where the body fabrication takes place, with an English wheel among all the usual rollers, brakes, benders and other associated metalworking tools and equipment needed for such painstaking construction. There's a basic CNC machine, along with every type of welding equipment, blasting cabinets, hydraulic presses, paint booth, alignment equipment, chassis dyno and an engine dyno to test and fine-tune engines before they are installed. They even have the ability to conduct their own in-house metal plating for small items that require cadmium, zinc or brass plating.

"Basically, we are a fully outfitted, comprehensive 'specialty' car facility," Jason proudly told us. "And, I am a tool and equipment geek, so, for every piece of 'obvious' equipment we have, I have something highly specialized and unique to classic cars or a particular marque. How about our vintage wire harness loomer/braider, so we can cloth-wrap our own wires! We have drawers filled with tools that are custom made or original for specific cars' bizarre, unique, peculiar requirements."

Jason continued, "At this point, the only thing we can't do in-house is chrome plating. This is mostly due to the high cost of EPA compliance, so it isn't feasible to just 'set this up.' We also work with several specialists in the field, but they are chosen very carefully. Basically, we have to make a decision: 'Is that specialist we are going to trust doing 'X' for us, able to do it better, as reliably and of equal quality as we could, and at a better price because they are fully set up and specialized?' If the answer is no to any of this, we do it ourselves. If we bang into something that we haven't done before, and are not comfortable working with anyone else, I will purchase the equipment, tooling, supplies, etc., so we can become fully versed in executing the 'X' to perfection. We will go through our learning curve on a shop ticket, and when we are comfortable in our ability, we will then do the client's job. One example of this would be gauge rebuilding. We certainly rebuild gauges in-house, but in several instances, working with a specialist is more efficient."

Through the years, the Creative Workshop has become well known for its restorations of rare and limited-production sports cars and coachbuilt cars, mainly of Italian origin, but including several uncommon British cars as well. The 1951 Connaught that was the subject of a Restoration Profile in the January 2008 issue of HS&EC is just the type of unusual car that they are entrusted to restore to exacting, factory correct standards.

"We've become known for our 'etceterini' restorations, which are the small-manufacturer Italian vintage race and sporting cars, although in some instances, we combine other nationalities into this as long as they are of similar unique and small-manufacturer background," Jason said. "But besides this, we consider ourselves multi-marque--we love cars--and will take on any project if the person behind the project wants real work done. You might say we specialize in doing it correctly the first time, which is nowhere near as easy as people think or say it is!"

At the time of our visit, there were several production-based cars in the shop undergoing restoration, including an E-type, a Dino 246GTS, a Vauxhall wagon and a Ferrari 250GT Spyder, as well as a Chevelle and a Buick Riviera. In the metal fabrication room there was an ultra-rare 1955 Alfa Romeo 1900 CSS with Ghia-Aigle coachwork being rebuilt, and the very same 1948 Healey Westland that we profiled in the August 2009 issue was in for a repaint and some mechanical fixes to factory-correct specifications. But the most common request is "body and paint," with the extreme being the rebuild of a Moretti twin-cam engine.

Jason is quick to point out that they don't say they specialize in restoring European sports cars, because he doesn't want to sound exclusive, and not have the ability to work on production-based cars. "During some periods we may be hardcore Italian sports car restorers and then have a British phase, or a prewar phase. I can't explain it; it's like the car gods are watching and deliberately mess with us to keep us on our toes!" Jason said. "I think what it may be is that people who are looking for real craftsmen, who share their passion for cars, find us. And when they do, it gives them confidence to explore their car fantasies, finally knowing that whatever they find or want to pursue, they have a team of professionals that can get it done for them. I've had clients bring me 'cars' in buckets and say, 'restore this,' and I have had hardcore American car clients fall in love with a prewar British car and bring it to us because they know we can comfortably handle it. Perhaps you can say we empower our collector clients to have fun as they search for their next car passion, which in turn keeps a steady flow of change happening here."

The end result of cars being restored runs the gamut from quality street restorations to concours-winning standards, although the majority are for show. However, they do take on smaller projects, and work closely with their clients to maintain a reasonable budget for "street" work when required.

At any one time, there are upwards of 20 cars in the shop being worked on concurrently. "This is approximately divided into 10 projects that are smaller--service and repair, upgrading or minor restoration work," Jason said. "The other half is divided into full restorations for the hobbyist and concours restorations that compete at the major shows."

A comprehensive ground-up, body-off restoration usually takes about 1,000 man hours to complete; however, if a car is to be restored to a Pebble Beach standard, then it can easily take upwards of 5,000 hours, all dependent, of course, on the condition of the car when it first came into the shop.

When it comes to stripping old paint off, they are very careful to use the correct method for that particular car in order to avoid damage to the body. "We deal with vintage steel, aluminum and fiberglass. Currently we are restoring a 1 of 3 Arnott that was built in 1952. It was built out of a 'fiberglass' concoction--it's actually burlap, or as the Brits called it 'Hessian Cloth'--with some kind of catalyzed resin. This car was built on the 'cutting edge of technology' at that point in time!" Jason told us. "That being said, steel can be chemically stripped, and reinforced channels can be blasted, but never flat panels, and aluminum is never blasted, so it is always chemically or mechanically stripped. I know you can use chemical stripping on fiberglass but we never do--only mechanical stripping. Basically, every project is evaluated, materials tested and in almost every situation, a series of techniques are used to get the vehicle to the base substrate. You also have to consider that in many cases, we are working on a car with serious historical importance. If you go too fast, you may very well erase an important piece of history or information. I can't tell you how many times during the stripping process that we have uncovered original colors, original scraps of material or, as amazing as it sounds, body parts that were subsequently hidden by prior work that was poorly done. Using our most recent example, the little Arnott had a passenger door that was completely glassed over at some point, and this is not the first time we have uncovered stuff like this.

"The biggest issue when working with coachbuilt cars is knowing when to distinguish a hand-built peculiarity from a mistake or previous repair work disasters," Jason said. "We often find ourselves walking a thin line between leaving something that was hand built, and could have obviously been done better or tighter or straighter and 'fixing' it. We have worked on cars where left and right door openings are different sizes; do you 'fix' this? Obviously no, but sometimes these idiosyncrasies are hard to know. For example, on that Ghia-Aigle-bodied 1900 CSS Alfa Romeo that we just finished, the rear trunk area is gorgeous, but the trim on the back is a bit crooked. All of the individual components line up nicely, but if you step back far enough and stare, the entire 'system' is just slightly crooked off of the centerline of the car. So, do you remove that? We didn't, but it was tough not to!

"Other problems are more obvious, such as the availability of rare parts, information and the correct materials, all of which create challenges that must be overcome. We often find ourselves making parts from scratch or hunting down suppliers in the farthest reaches of the world, using translation services to communicate, to find the person who has the last whatchamacallit to save the day; it can be exhausting!"

For final finishing, they will spray lacquer if that particular project requires it, but they mainly rely on modern two-part urethane from PPG. For custom colors they use House of Kolor paint, as well the exotic finishes from Alsa. "The biggest trick, regardless of the type or brand, is getting the color just right," Jason advises. "We often have to deal with what is called an 'offset'--basically, tricking a modern color into looking like an original. Back then, they used totally different chemicals, so even though a modern formula may say it is 'correct' for a 1956 'X or Y,' it rarely if ever looks like the original, so we have to use different pigments and/or additives to dial it in just right. All of these 'adjustments' we keep track of in our secret paint book."

Judging by the high quality of their work, it's clear that Jason and his talented staff appreciate and enjoy restoring all types of collector cars. "I really love all cars. I consider myself an underdog car lover," Jason proudly exclaimed. "The more obscure, rare, and off-the-beaten-path they come, the more I love them. Remember, every car that was designed and built in earnest was done by someone who truly loved cars and wanted to create something special. They deserve our attention. So, although I have an affinity for a wide spectrum of cars, coachbuilt Italian cars certainly fits the bill of what captures my attention."

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