

Going Full Circle

Jason Wenig, owner of The Creative Workshop, left the corporate world for the restoration world almost 20 years ago. It was the right move

by Chester Allen



Jason Wenig rides the running board on the 1921 Kissel 6-45 "Gold Bug" Speedster owned by Andrew and Tanya Heller at the 2019 Amelia Island Concours. The car, restored by Wenig's company The Creative Workshop, won an award for American Classic 1917-1929

Way back in 2000, Jason Wenig left the New York business world and immersed himself in his first love — cars. He went into the car restoration business. Just a few years later, one of his restorations was at Pebble Beach. Lots of cars from The Creative Workshop have graced concours lawns since then. Wenig, 49, will accept the 2019 Master Craftsman Award from America's Automotive Trust (LeMay Museum) in September. He's also this month's SCM Interview:

How did the Creative Workshop get started?

I spent my childhood working on anything and everything. I would build go-carts out of angle iron — didn't have a welder — I would bolt the joints together. My family had a 1967 Jaguar 420 — which was our daily driver — and constantly breaking down. My father would always be fixing it — and he was a BIG guy and couldn't get his hands into nooks and crannies — and so he would pick me up and dangle me over the engine bay, and I would snake my hands in there and tighten bolts or fish out things that got dropped.

When I was older and of the age to have a car, I would spend the summer days working on my 1968 Ford Bronco — customizing, fixing, swapping carbs, engines, suspensions, etc. ...

Still, I pursued a more New York City path — undergrad, graduate school and then into New York for a corporate career. All the while I would come home on the weekends (to my childhood home) to work on cars. The connecting dots happened when friends asked me to join a company they were starting — selling car parts online. Long story short, the startup did not work out. So I had to make a choice — go back to corporate or do something else.

The moment Creative Workshop was founded, I was at Bud's Creek Maryland race-track, when my girlfriend (now my wife with two kids!) watched as a 10-second 1967 Camaro went down the strip. She looked at the car, looked at me and said, "Why don't we do something with classic cars?"

And that started your path to becoming a world-class car restorer, coachbuilder and repair shop?

This was the year 2000. It all seemed to converge — my background building cars growing up, my natural mechanical aptitude and unyielding love of cars, being raised with oil in my blood, working at that crazy dot com in the professional car world — and now my soon-to-be-fiancée saying, "Let's do this."

We came down to Florida, rented a car and drove over 1,300 miles looking at about a dozen places — until we stumbled upon "The Barn" (our business location). This old barn was a going concern that was doing restoration work — but was being run by a rather difficult, cantankerous "should have gotten out of the business 10 years ago and is angry beyond recognition that he is still doing this" type of guy when we met him.

The building was built in the mid-1930s — exposed wood floors and beams — and through all of the filth and neglect and issues, there was something truly magical about this old barn. We were smitten.

So we flew back to New York, begged, borrowed and stole, gathered every penny we had and purchased the business/building/land. We put our keys in our door for the first time in August of 2002.

The one employee that was here was very talented — a highly skilled restorer who had the ability to build great cars. I kept him — and he is still with me today

— as “restoration manager” of the shop. He is a true craftsman — and in many ways helped me understand the difference between a good car, a great car and a concours/exceptional car.

So it was a struggle...

The path was long and difficult — learning the ins and outs of the types of clients, expectations, skill sets and employees and everything in between. But I was dedicated and passionate. And I reminded myself that I was working with cars — a lifelong dream — so I pushed forward every day. What started with one client and some great successes led to another and so on.

The video series on turning a 1966 Ferrari 330 GT into a completely different coachbuilt tribute to Giovanni Michelotti is compelling to watch. Have you gotten any flak about cutting into a Ferrari to build a one-off tribute car?

Actually, no. I was a bit concerned about that as well, but our clients are fantastic — and their pursuit of this project was heartfelt and passionate and knowledgeable. This project/idea was part of their lives for over 40 years.

The car was built in the same manner as the original coachbuilt cars were built back in the day. That Old World craftsmanship and detail is not readily found today — but when you see it, it takes your breath away.

It is a real Ferrari, built the way Italian car builders would have done it back then. It is not a replica — it is homage — based on the original car and my client’s thoughtful design changes.

Your videos on the 1921 Kissel 6-45 “Gold Bug” Speedster are also very cool. I saw this car at Amelia Island, and it was amazing. How do you jump from creating a Ferrari Michelotti tribute to the painstaking, historical restoration of the Kissel?

I love cars and the diversity of cars. How you jump from one nationality to another, one era to another, one brand to another — is TENACITY! You either love the work or you don’t. If you love it, it isn’t work — it is learning.

I can also say that over the years of working with the incredible diversity of cars we’ve seen — our skills and knowledge have increased exponentially. It is amazing when you have correctly worked on a 1940s car — or 1920s or 1930s — how you can see how the technology and techniques have evolved into the 1950s and 1960s. That knowledge helps you understand and fix (and forensically restore) that car from the 1960s.

I know you and your team are comfortable restoring a wide variety of cars — from American muscle to Detroit iron to the best European sports cars. What makes your outfit so versatile?

My first responsibility is to my clients. The relationship with each client is the most important thing. I am their trusted partner in all things cars. I help with everything from finding/acquiring cars to support on the show field. We have evolved into a place where the things that no one else can do — or has the patience or skill sets to take on — end up with us.

What would you say to a young man or young woman who is thinking about a career in car restoration?

For us, it is not necessarily hard-core experience or skills that make a good restorer. Rather, in many instances it is heart and thinking. The desire to do great work. To be proud of the work they do. To enjoy and look forward to the challenges (and not be afraid of them), to want to learn about the cars that are entrusted to us. Perhaps most importantly — to have the internal check valve that, regardless of how difficult the challenge, never lets them take the easy way out. Tenacity. Of course, they have to be talented — and have



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But it is the other traits that really make a great restorer. And that is what we look for.

How do new people get training?

We are faced with the blunt reality that the people that know about these cars are slowly dying off. To help combat this, I have become very involved with the RPM Foundation — a nonprofit put together by the America’s Automotive Trust (the LeMay Museum) and Hagerty (and several other contributors) — a group that helps develop school curriculum, provides scholarships, outreach to shops for placement, connecting with shops that are run correctly — real places that provide real jobs with real futures.

Basically, we’re creating a network of interconnected elements to help create a future for this hobby through mentorship and craftsmanship. Creating and having the talent to keep our cars alive is in trouble. The RPM Foundation is fighting back.

Do you have a collection of cars?

Currently in my stable is a 1960 Sunbeam Alpine custom that we built here. There is a 1925 Citroën Type C 5CV “Le Tréfle” and a 1959 Vauxhall station wagon. I have a 1955 5-window Chevy pickup rat rod that was built mostly from parts found when we initially cleaned this place out.

You’ve got a week with the car and co-pilot of your choice. What do you drive, who goes with you — and where do you go?

My wife, Kim, would be my co-pilot, and I think she would be able to handle a lot of it. So how about the Peking to Paris rally in a Volvo P444 or the Great American Race in a 4½ Litre Supercharged Blower Bentley? ♦

