

ANDY SAUNDERS

The Automotive Alchemist

By Andy Saunders

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IT'S OFTEN SAID that the people with the best cars are the ones who don't boast about them. The guy with a humdrum kit car he thinks is a hot rod will be quick to open his mouth and tell everyone why he's right (and they're wrong) – while the other guy, who's built a world class custom car, will stand quietly by and let his work do the talking.

Andy Saunders is a very well known name in the scene, and indeed beyond. But seldom has there been a better example of someone who lets their cars do the talking. It's an approach that's writ large in his book, *The Automotive Alchemist*, which was published last year to great acclaim.

A feature of the customising game is that there's more to it than just skill. Your ability

in the workshop defines the quality of what you turn out, perhaps – but the knowledge you put in defines its worth. Hot rodding and customising are a heady blend of history and artistry, expressed through the media of spanners and welders, hammers and dollies and so on.

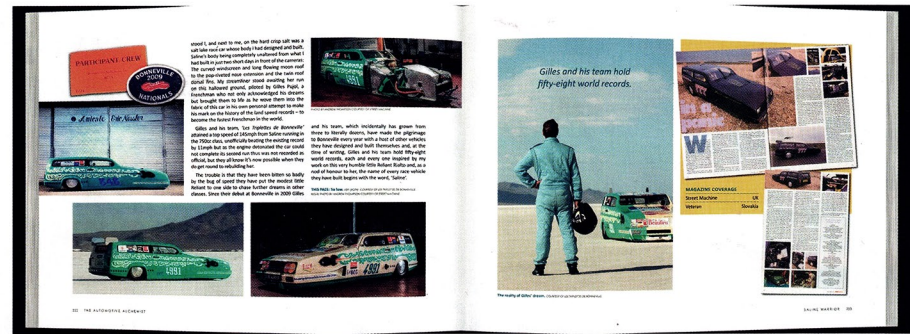
Reading Andy's words, the breadth and depth of his knowledge is never far from the surface. His famous sense of humour shines through at every turn of a page, too – as does his self-effacing modesty.

The title of the book, for example, might lead you to assume that he's talking about his own ability to turn base metal into gold. But the first use of the word 'alchemist' we could find in the text is in fact referring

to Uncle Reggie, a friend of his dad, who Andy describes watching in awe at an early age.

'He was welding a new roof on to a virtually new Capri that had been rolled. Dad and I arrived as the new roof skin was being positioned. I was mesmerised and watched the whole process from the positioning of the roof, to hammer welding the large C pillar and finally the grinding of the welds. I felt I had witnessed the working secrets of an alchemist.'

Uncle Reggie was to become a seminal figure as Andy accompanied him on recovery duty at the banger races at Spedworth oval. It was here that his interest in working with metal started to take new forms, as he studied the damaged vehicles they towed



from the track: *'Hidden within the dark shadows of the twisted bodyshells, I saw shapes and disfigurements that had been worked into the tortured metal... Some of these shapes appeared so beautiful, mutilated metal that transfixed me.'* Andy believes this was an early manifestation of what he calls one of his greatest tools – the ability to see shapes that did not yet exist.

This is a gift which has been at the heart of his prodigious output over forty-plus years of building custom cars. None more so, of course, than his latest masterpiece, the famous *Déjà*, which we featured in our March 2023 issue following its triumphant debut at the 2022 Classic Car Show.

To skip from Andy's days with Uncle Reggie to the final chapter of the book would be to miss out an entire lifetime's work. Nonetheless, we can consider his thoughts on how his hand-built, steel-bodied Delahaye roadster came to be the way it is. This is where an intense knowledge of the subject elevates a true master above a mere expert; Andy explains that he was inspired by the flamboyant side profile and sweeping curves of the Jacques Saoutchik Delahaye 175, once owned by Diana Dors, and the opulent front of the 165 styled by Figoni et Falaschi. Not wanting to build a mere replica of either, however, he set out to create his own by amalgamating the two styles – the result being a vehicle 'eighty-five years late for her debut at the Paris Salon de l'Automobile.'

Many of the world's finest cars came from an era in which industrial design paid a proud homage to fine art. If *Déjà* is a car from the art nouveau tradition, *Metropolis*, a 1939 Peugeot 202 pick-up, deserves to be seen alongside the Chrysler Building, Hoover

Dam and Rockefeller Plaza as world-class examples of art deco.

So too was the unique styling of the Cord 812, a vehicle which looked like a custom car when new. Cord was the first manufacturer to use front-wheel drive – but even with this pioneering approach to engineering, the vehicle's so-called 'coffin-nose' styling was what really set it apart.

It would be futile to try and pick out one of Andy's builds as his best or most famous, however if you were to ask a group of people at a car show it's certain that *Tetanus* would be among those most frequently mentioned. This is a 1937 Cord 812 Westchester, which he bought as a restoration project in 2003 and finally presented in its finished form almost a decade and a half later. It's not until you read his anecdotes about the utter plight of the vehicle when he took it on that you start to understand how the job could have taken so long.

Each of these vehicles is described in great detail as the book progresses. The text is conversational – a deliberate choice, Andy says, as he experimented with writing styles and found it the best way to be himself – and the layout is as beautiful as the cars themselves, with abundant pictures both from during the builds and after their completion. So many icons of the custom world are here: *Jag-ged Edge*, *Indecision*, *Claustrophobia*, *Mentally Insane* and *Picasso*, to name a few. In particular, the salvation of the extraordinary Aurora Safety Sedan makes for remarkable reading – a story in which

he laments contemporary commentators' inability to see past the vehicle's appearance and understand its significance to the future of automotive design.

In between these many chapters on Andy's builds are others considering more general themes. *The Influence of Dream Cars*, *The Art of Kustom*, *Wild Wheels and Grease Machines...* this is very much a man sharing his knowledge and learning, not just talking about himself and the cars he has built. Nonetheless, a sure stop-off as you flick through the book's 464 pages will be the

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final appendix, titled *Where Are They Now?;* though some of these unique creations are no more, the sheer number to have survived is testament to the fact that customising truly is a form of art that goes far beyond the car itself.

That much will be obvious from your first look at *Déjà* on the cover, through the array of vehicles featured and indeed in the many examples illustrated of artwork by Maxine Xavier, Andy's partner, whose skills with an air brush are on a similarly high level to his own in the workshop. This is a vast, lavish and beautiful book, but one whose appeal is never just skin deep; in it, you will find glorious illustrations without end but, more importantly, a treasure trove of knowledge and experience as told by one of the world's most prolific and creative car builders – and, as it turns out, a beguiling storyteller, too.