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# Gold Coast

THE MAGAZINE FLORIDA

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Anniversary

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## CAR RESTORATION





# The Art of Making Old New

BY BERNARD McCORMICK

"AS LONG AS I REMEMBER, I WAS KNEE DEEP IN CARS. I was always the guy tinkering, the guy with the greasy palms. My father and I used to restore Jaguars. I've always been involved with cars."

Jason Wenig speaking, by way of explaining why he and his wife gave up careers in New York City to buy a business located in a rat-infested barn in Dania Beach. The barn, which dates to the 1930s, was once used to store grain. Today it is the home of The Creative Workshop, which restores vintage cars. And trucks. And buses. Even race cars. If it is old and rolls, it turns Wenig on. To him, his business and its projects are art.

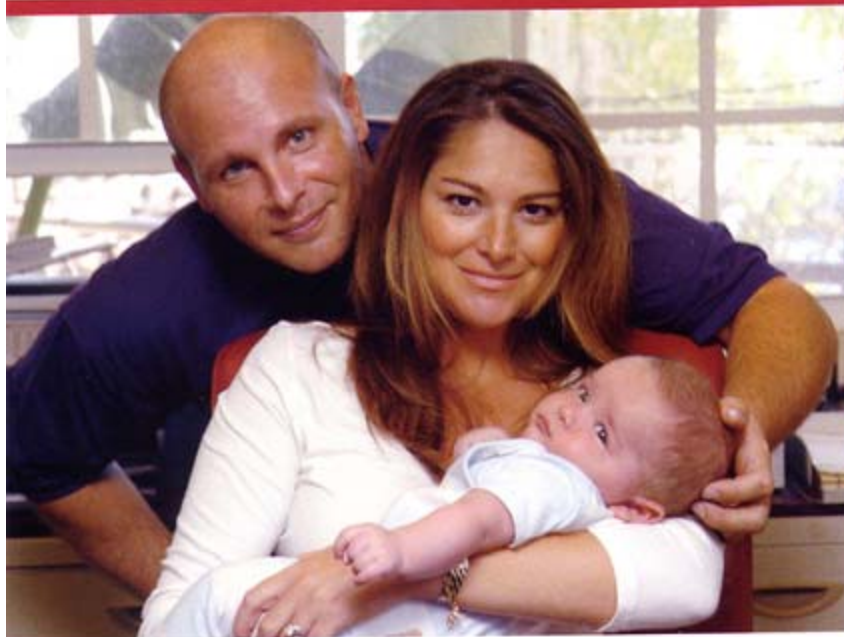
"Everything about cars is artistic," he said. "The paint, the color choices, the leather, the design — it's all artistic. And the guys who work here are not mechanics. A guy can come in and say he worked on Audis or Mercedes, and he's lost when he sees this. They're used to working where everything fits. We have to make them fit. One guy here is a wood master; one guy's a leather master; one guy's a metal master. Everything is creative."

He spoke in a comfortable but rustic office in the front of his shop. Sitting at the desk was his wife Kim, giving a bottle to their 3-month-old son, Jett. She was formerly the right-hand woman for the owner of a company in New York's high stress fashion industry. He had spent 12 years in the advertising business after graduating from Syracuse University and getting a master's degree in marketing at Baruch College in New York. They made the decision to go out on their own five years ago while watching an auto race. After an eight-month search for the right business, a broker led them to Dania. The restoration company had been in business 20 years but was in decline, down to only three employees and three projects. Four years later, a dozen employees are working on 27 vehicles. Gone is the stench of rats. The old barn has the charm of the mixed scents of lubricants, paint and fresh leather.

(Top left) Jason Wenig stands amid a variety of restorations in his Dania Beach shop, formerly a grain barn. (Lower left) One of Wenig's favorite jobs, a Motta-MG special. He stands in front of a nearly completed 1966 Lamborghini 400 GT. In the background is a 1955 Mercury.

Photography By DIANE BRADFORD

## CAR RESTORATION



*"If it's easy,  
it's not  
worth doing.  
We go the  
extra mile."*

- JASON WENIG

"It was scary to come in here," said Wenig. "There were dead rats everywhere. It took us months to get rid of the smell. But this old place had a vibe. My wife and I felt it right away, and I'm not an antique-y kind of guy. I'm a big city guy. That's why we bought a house on the east side of Fort Lauderdale. I couldn't live way out west. I need a city."

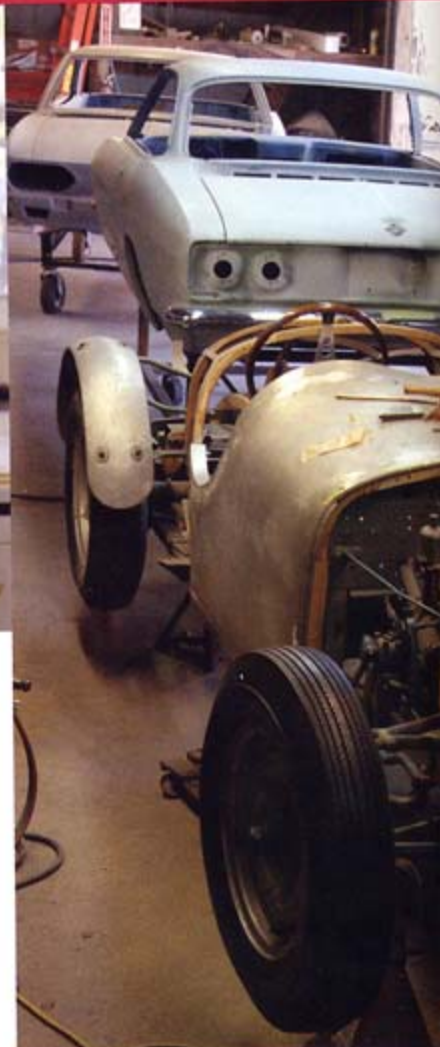
The Creative Workshop's oldest current car is a 1923 Citroen. The youngest is a 1973 Chevrolet C-10 hot rod.

"We rarely do anything after 1974," he explained. "That's when cars began to change. They stopped being about design and old fashioned wiring and heavy metal and chrome, and they became plastic. That's when lawyers and insurance companies and environmentalists - all these compounds - began affecting the way cars were built. It took awhile for technology to catch up, and now we're going back to design again. If we do a car newer than the 1970s, it is either something really radical or as a favor for a friend or for a good customer."

Although the bigger bucks are usually in older classics that were expensive to start with, Wenig enjoys restoring more mundane vehicles.

"I don't like to be pretentious. I'll do a Mustang, a station wagon. I like cars."

The shop last month had two Chevrolet Corvairs from the early 1960s. That was the small (for that era) rear engine car inspired

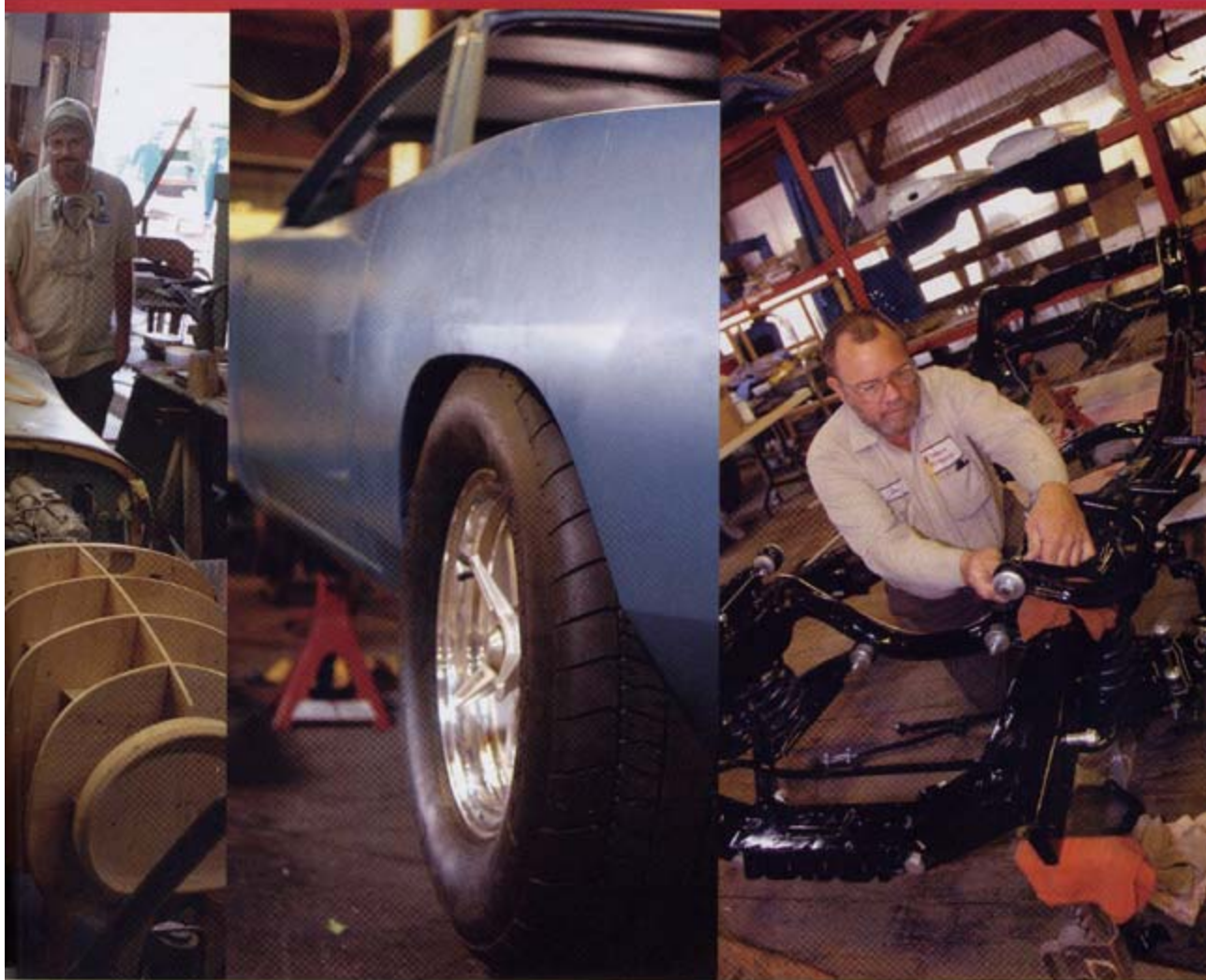


(Top left) Kim Wenig is her husband's partner. She visits the shop each morning, lately with their new son, Jett.

by the success of the Volkswagen Beetle. It suffered a short life after Ralph Nader became famous raising safety issues. Restoring those cars will likely cost 50 times what they brought when new.

"If all the stars align, we may be able to do a job for \$50,000," he said. "But you may have to find a part in Yugoslavia that costs \$7,000 or find a way to make a part so that only a real expert can tell it isn't original. If it's easy, it's not worth doing. We go the extra mile. So most of our projects wind up north of six digits."





**(From left) Shop manager Mike Williams, with a very rare British Connaught racer, one of only three built. Behind him are two Chevrolet Corvairs from the early 1960s. This expensive custom wheel is on a 1968 Charger muscle car. Restoration begins with the frame. Joe Ramierez works on this one from the 1955 Mercury Montclair Sunvalley.**

Among the conveyances in the shop last month was a German Setra bus from 1956.

"We call this a converted restoration," said Wenig. "From the outside, only an expert on buses could tell it isn't original. But under the façade, all the components are modern. This will be like an RV. You can drive it across the country, and if something breaks, you can go to any NAPA store, and it will have the part.

"This is not about money. You don't do restorations for an investment. I like

to say it's like wall art. People don't care what they pay for wall art. It's about how that art makes them feel when they look at it. Cars are not about book value. The leather, the vinyl, the gas, the fumes— it's all visceral. And when you go out to the garage in the morning and turn the ignition and have the car start and how it rumbles— it's how all that makes you feel."

Wenig's manner of speaking is as creative as the work his company does, and his enthusiasm gleams like the 1957

Studebaker Golden Hawk that was finished recently. As a bonus, the Wenigs find the move from New York to their own business has been good for the morale of both. Even with the baby, Kim manages to spend some time in the mornings working on the business side.

"This is why we're having so much fun," he said. "We were in New York, the toughest city to do business, both of us. And what we might call a hard day in this business would be a hard hour where we came from." ■