

Captivating by Design

BY BROOKS BRIERLEY

» IMAGINE: WERE MICHELANGELO around for car design, this stunning coupe could be one of his masterpieces.

The Fitzpatrick Custom was just a dream in 1947 when a former World War II fighter pilot, Phil Lacey, showed his friend Al Fitzpatrick some of his car sketches. Fitzpatrick asked Lacey to build one of the cars, and thereby joined a Southern California movement to fashion two-seaters—called sports customs—from existing automobiles. Major manufacturers got in on the act, too, and the Chevrolet Corvette, Kaiser Darrin and Ford Thunderbird were born.

Long before computer-aided design, a three-foot-long side elevation made of paper was the basis for construction of the Fitzpatrick Custom. Lacey used Packard mechanicals, adding a 160-hp Super Eight motor to one of the marque's more modest 122-inch wheelbase chassis. The Packard's wide chassis rails minimized the need for modifications.

For three years working part time at night, Lacey was a coach-builder. His metal-shaper and right-hand man is now remembered only as Lucky. Lacey and Lucky incorporated features from other luxury marques into the Fitzpatrick, such as rear fenders from a Cadillac found in a junkyard. By contrast, the compound curves in the front fenders were laboriously hammer-welded (sans lead filler) from numerous little pieces of metal.

The Fitzpatrick Custom was a technical achievement to boot. Adding a specially made aluminum manifold and new carburetors improved engine output to 200 hp.

The car was nearly complete when Lacey was recalled to duty for the Korean War. Fitzpatrick had a trim shop finish the interior, and then it was put on display in Packard's Beverly Hills showroom. A full-page write-up in the November 1950 *Road & Track* ensured the coupe started life as a star.

An unknown number of owners later, the Fitzpatrick Custom was in Pennsylvania in the 1970s being reworked for modern driving. This included installing a General Motors 350 V8, automatic transmission (the



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shifter is a stick on the transmission hump), power steering and air conditioning. In a reverse of technology, the original power windows were replaced with mechanical cranks. Repainting in black the car's original metallic blue body and white top provided the finishing touch.

Today the Fitzpatrick is a rolling advertisement to customizing and updating an older car, poised in performing every contemporary driving task. The leather-covered roof, framed in balsa wood, is detachable and easy to use.

The driver enjoys subtle period features inside. A simple enameled dash is centered on three large round dials with gold bezels. The bucket seats are just right, and there is plenty of headroom, despite the car's 48-inch height. Riding so close to the ground is Corvette-like—but the Fitzpatrick surely doesn't handle like any sports car. The solid front and rear axles translate into taking it easy in turns driving on suburban streets.

Joe Bortz had seen the Fitzpatrick Custom years ago but was unsure of its origins. After Bortz bought the car at an Atlantic City auction in 2004, the publicity of its sale led to a call from Lacey's son, who cleared some things up. The coupe's original sketches and construction photos survive, providing historical context for the Fitzpatrick's captivating looks. Bortz says the car makes an important contribution to automotive design. "It's sculpture," he says, "Michelangelo kind of stuff."

Bortz organized a reunion of the Fitzpatrick Custom and Lacey, with a TV shoot by *Dream Car Garage* in its own Toronto-area showroom this past July. Lacey was visibly moved when the coupe's cover was pulled back. Recalling its history perfectly, he did a walkaround, pointing out intriguing details. Now others will know the slanted door molding is not just a nod to aesthetics but a practical feature, making for a comfortable armrest when driving.

More than half a century later the car is still a star, as a broadcast of the reunion is planned for this winter on Speed TV. ■

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The subject of a 2000-hour-plus restoration, this car is an absolute showstopper. It had covered more than 6000 miles since restoration, and it was hard to see how as the finish is still so good. These cars are remarkable. Recently the market caught fire for them, and genuine cars are commanding huge money, but they must be documented as fakes do exist. This is a great result, not just because it's high, but because it silenced some detractors who listed previous high results for these cars as "freak," and it proves again the market continues to move upward. —KEITH MARTIN