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GABRIEL B. TAIT/Detroit Free Press

Chuck Miller's garage is like a museum of classic cars.

A surfer's dream without the surf: Restorer revives the wood-sided car

February 24, 2000

BY TONY SWAN
DETROIT FREE PRESS AUTO CRITIC

Surf Detroit?

That notion would sound absurd even in midsummer, let alone late February, but it's just Chuck Miller's way of calling attention to the gang of woodies -- the original poster cars of surfing -- he's helping to marshal up at the 48th annual Autorama hot rod extravaganza this weekend at Detroit's Cobo Center.

Miller expects about a dozen wood-sided cars to show up at Cobo, most of them station wagons.

Cars and wagons with exterior bodywork fashioned from wood paneling -- real wood, that is -- had all but disappeared from showrooms by the mid-'50s, and because they were never produced in huge numbers to begin with, even the most common of them are relatively rare today.

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And some of the cars Miller is rounding up for his "Woodies in Cobo" display -- complete with sand, lifeguard chair and a beach hut -- are even rarer than their uncommon brethren.

For example, the collection will include a 1940 Willys, a '42 Ford used by the Navy in World War II and still wearing its Navy colors, a '34 Ford, a '47 Packard and a '47 Ford Sportsman convertible.

There also will be an unrestored '50 Mercury, "just so people can get an idea of what it takes to get one of these cars into show condition," Miller says.

Compared with some of the rarities he's summoned to the show, Miller's own entry, a '47 Ford woody wagon, might seem just a bit ordinary, but don't be misled.

While the exterior looks essentially stock, aside from Miller's creamsicle paint job, there's plenty of get-up-and-go under the Ford's hood, which shelters a 350-cubic-inch engine from a 1992 Cadillac fed by a four-barrel carburetor. Remember carburetors?

Inside, Miller substituted Pontiac Grand Am bucket seats for the originals, installed a Chevy S-10 pickup instrument pod in the hand-fabricated dashboard, mounted a set of old Thunderbird sequential tail-signal lamps at the rear and reupholstered everything after a thorough body-off restoration.

"I got the car from a guy in Boston who had his own body shop," Miller recalls. "He got as far as taking the body apart, and then I guess he lost interest. So it was pretty much a basket case, though a lot of the wood was in surprisingly good shape.

"Anyway, when I got it to my shop we went right down to the frame and went to work."

Creating the Red Baron

As cool as the creamsicle woody is, it's pretty tame compared with the creations that made Miller quite literally famous in custom car circles, right up there with George Barris and Ed (Big Daddy) Roth.

Consider, for example, the Red Baron.

Inspired by the World War I aerial fantasies of Snoopy, the Charles Schulz "Peanuts" character, this 1969 creation featured a cabin that looked like an Imperial German army helmet, with a pair of mock machine guns flanking a supercharged Pontiac in-line, six-cylinder engine.

The Baron is probably Miller's most famous creation, and it was the Show Sweepstakes winner at the '69 Oakland Roadster Show, essentially California's Autorama.

IF YOU GO TO THE SHOW

What: The Big Kmart Detroit Autorama, the 48th annual custom hot rod show. More than 800 chopped, channeled, souped-up, customized cars, trucks, vans, motorcycles and hot rods will be on display and competing for awards.

When: Friday, 4-11; Saturday, 10-11; Sunday, 10-8.

Where: Cobo Center, downtown Detroit

Admission: Adults \$12.50; children under 12, \$5; children under 3, free.

Information: 248-650-5560

But his Fire Truck -- a hand-crafted, small-scale version of a pre-WWI truck in fire engine livery with a mega-power, supercharged V8 engine -- was nearly as spectacular and won the top award at the '68 Autorama.

And there have been many others over the years.

A 1961 graduate of Lincoln Park High School, Miller went to work for Dick Fackender in Dick's Collision, a modest River Rouge body shop, handling routine insurance repairs.

In 1963, Fackender sold the business to Miller and moved to Florida. Dick's Collision became Styline Customs. Miller developed a creative synergy with promoter Bob Larivee, and over the next 36 years Miller's shop was one of the hottest creative crucibles in the world of custom cars.

Highlights include the Corvette wagons, several years of overseeing the painting of the PPG pace cars, and the Zingers, a series of half-scale VW Beetles with monster engines, to name just a few.

In addition to being trophy winners and great traffic makers at hot rod shows, Miller's uninhibited automotive art has served as the inspiration for a number of scale models from companies such as Monogram, MPC, AMT and others.

But all things must pass. In April of last year Miller sold the Styline operation to one-time understudy Mike Kieliszek.

"It was 36 years to the day," says Miller.

More to come from Miller

Leaving Styline behind doesn't necessarily mean you won't see other new Miller-mobiles.

Though his hair and beard are silver, Miller's blue eyes sparkle with the energy of that same Lincoln Park kid who did his first custom at age 16.

When the 2000 Autorama show is in the books, Miller will finish setting up his new shop, behind his home in New Boston, not far from Metro Airport.

The place is already half-filled with several of his noteworthy cars -- the Fire Truck, a Corvette wagon, the Ford woody -- as well as the accumulated memorabilia of a lifetime in the world of hot rods.

"I'm setting up a little spray booth, and the difference now is that I can pick and choose, do what I want," he says. "Maybe I'll do a little consulting. And I like collectibles: kids' pedal cars, stuff like that.

"I've been doing this too long to just stop."

So if you're suddenly consumed with an overpowering need to put a first-rate flame job on the family hot rod, fear not -- Chuck Miller is still out there.