



Thunderbird

Dwayne Peace's Ridler-winning '55

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Photography by Josh Mishler

You normally don't want to mess with something after it achieves icon status because, in most people's eyes, it has already attained perfection. Put a better smile on the Mona Lisa? Nah. Change the original formula for the Dublin, Texas-brewed Dr. Pepper? Some things are better left alone.

But every once in a while it happens: an improvement in what went before. Like when Jimi Hendrix retooled Bob Dylan's classic "All Along the Watchtower" song, or when Steve Jobs introduced the original iPhone to the world in January of 2007, permanently displacing smartphone designs from the previous decade.

But when it comes to car design, there are many that, no matter how hard they try, just can't be improved upon. The original VW Beetle shape is certainly iconic (though Volkswagen continues to try and beat that drum) and, especially in the hot rod world, you can't really improve upon Eugene Gregorie and Edsel Ford's designs for the one-year-only '32 Fords, though many have tried.

In late 1953, Chevrolet tried to introduce Americans to their own brand of Euro-influenced sports cars with the Corvette, but the underpowered two-seater nearly flopped before the company got its act together a few years later. In contrast, when Ford introduced the Thunderbird in 1955, it was viewed as everything an American sports car could be.

Stylish in design and powerful underhood (aided by a 193hp 292 V-8), the first T-bird smashed expected sales estimates and outsold the Vette in 1955 by a staggering 23-to-1 ratio. The impact of those first 'Birds firmly vaulted the vehicle to an immediate iconic level and, at least for the '55-'57-era 'Birds, it has remained there for more than 60 years, and Dwayne Peace couldn't agree more.

A dentist living in Tyler, Texas, Dwayne has tinkered with cars for most of his life. Having always liked the design of the early T-birds, he acquired a numbers-matching '55 more than 20 years ago. At the time the car had been through one restoration and was in decent shape but, two decades later, Dwayne's wife, Carolyn, said it was time to either sell it or restore it, but one of their two sons, Matt, told his dad they needed to do something other than another restoration.

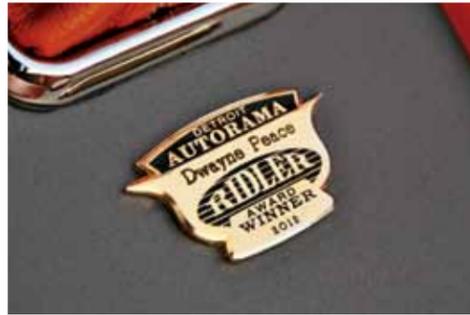
Matt, along with his younger brother, Jonathan, had started Torq'd Design Lab in their hometown of Tyler and the goal from the two-man shop was to get the Thunderbird into the Pirelli Great 8 at the Detroit Autorama. Now in its 60th year, the Detroit Autorama is probably most famous for its Don Ridler Memorial Award—the top prize at the indoor car

show—that's given to a vehicle that best displays stylish and innovative design. The Pirelli Great 8 is the group of eight finalists chosen from which the Ridler is picked, so getting into the Pirelli Great 8 is a major achievement in itself.

Dwayne's sons knew the project would be intense, but Jonathan had an ace up his sleeve: he was a transportation

INTERIOR:

► The '50s-era interior has given way to curvy contemporary shapes designed by Jonathan Peace. An aluminum console was created at Greening Auto Company and it runs between seats built at Torq'd and covered in leather by Paul Atkins Interiors. The steering wheel (a waterfall design from Jonathan and milled by Greening) exemplifies the simplistic interior. An iconic Movado clock centers the dash, and Classic Instruments provided the one-off tachometer.



design major at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, and knew a thing or two about designing parts and pieces. Jonathan thought if they could incorporate a tailored European look with a simple elegance then they'd have something unique and good looking.

With such a lofty goal in front of them, nothing would be left untouched and, over a period of three years, the car would receive hundreds of modifications and a long list of custom work, including an internal rollcage, new floors, an engine compartment design that would hide a twin-turbo setup, and a steel-infused interior that looks so slick and smooth it looks like it could have been taken out of a 2013 concept vehicle.

Matt and Jonathan started the project from the ground up, creating a new chassis from 2x4-inch rectangular and 1.5-

inch round tubing, setting it up on a 105-inch wheelbase (while the original's was 102 inches). Jonathan's "organic flowing" design meant it wasn't just a bunch of metal welded together under the car, but a conceptual design that could stand on its own merits, adding to the car's overall appearance rather than just supporting a body.

A Moser 9-inch rear (3.73:1) uses one-off triangulated polished stainless steel four-link and RideTech coilovers along with SSBC 13.6-inch cross-drilled discs and aluminum four-piston calipers (with a custom T-bird logo etched into the caliper's face). Up front, Torq'd built an independent suspension using Heidt's spindles, a Flaming River steering box (and ididit column), and another set of RideTech coilovers and SSBC discs (this time 14.1-inch). A Kugel Komponenten underdash master cylinder setup is mounted out of view,

and Clayton Machine Works provided the pedal assembly.

And just how the original Thunderbird V-8 made a difference over its competitors, the engine in Dwayne's "Bird" would be impressive, too. At 1,150 hp with 925 lb-ft of torque (at 21 pounds of boost), the injected 6.15L twin turbo from Gale Banks Engineering certainly makes a statement. Based in Azusa, California, Banks has been a performance source for hot rodders since 1958, and they know their way around diesel- and gas-engined powerplants, and they design turbocharged engines from the crank's centerline out.

The Banks block was first deburred and then painted before the Banks/Dart aluminum heads were bolted on. A Front Runner belt system from Vintage Air was also used, and a Gen VI EFI system from ACCEL delivers the mix, while the exhaust includes

headers designed and made by Jonathan and a set of Borla Sportsman XR-1 mufflers. Other goodies include an aluminum radiator from Ron Davis Racing and custom aluminum valve covers that feature a one-off machined T-bird emblem.

The fabrication of the car's parts and pieces as well as much of the redesign came from a collaboration of Matt and Jeff at Torq'd along with Jeff and Jesse Greening—a father-and-son team who run Greening Auto Company out of Nashville. The Greenings have a long history with award-winning hot rods, as well as with the Detroit Autorama, going back to when they built a Ridler winner for Paul Atkins in 2001. In some instances, the Greenings finished what Torq'd started, while in other spots it

was Jonathan or Matt building or modifying something or the Greenings creating something from scratch. Both teams contributed heavily to the final product.

So with one look around the engine compartment you'll notice this engine doesn't look like anything else out there, mostly due to the routing of the fresh air ducts for the twin turbos that come off the smoothed-up fenderwells or the air cleaner that flows into the cowl section of the car (both done by Jonathan). The Spearco aluminum intercoolers for the turbos are hidden behind the front wheels in the fenderwells. The radiator is also hidden, and is under a cover that eliminates the filler cap, which was moved to the top of the intake manifold and



and modifying what was left on the car as Torq'd estimates only 25 percent of the original body is still intact. Besides the hidden internal rollcage, Matt and Jonathan created a smooth underbelly for the car, modified the windshield posts, changed the hood so it operates alligator style rather than opening from the cowl, and re-peaked all of the body lines. The decklid was shortened, the hood scoop lengthened 6 inches, and the Greenings fabbed an aluminum inner panel to give a smooth appearance to the underside of the hood. Greening also built the twin fuel tanks under the trunk floor, and the bumpers were flipped upside-down and then tucked into the body for a tighter appearance.

More metalwork was fabbed inside the cockpit with the addition of a custom dash and an aluminum console (from Greening). Simple and subtle, dual cockpit coves are found on the dash, with only a single tachometer (custom by Classic Instruments) located in its own pod in front of the one-off waterfall steering wheel (designed by Jonathan and machined by Greening Auto Company) and a Movado clock (itself an iconic design)

mounted above the console and pieces are one specialty of the Greenings, and they came through for Dwayne in a big way. One of the first things the Greenings did with the body is set all the gaps on the doors, hood, and trunk. And many of the car's details, from the side trim to the rearview mirror, were CNC'd at Greening. The door tops were capped off (making it a true roadster) and Greening formed the two pieces of sheetmetal that were welded together to create the trim that runs around the edge of the cockpit before it was plated by Advanced Plating. Greening also made the custom push-button door release that was incorporated into the trim.

Parts such as the one-piece taillight housing, which incorporates the fender cap, lens ring, and a portion of the trunk trim, was first programmed by Greening into a CNC machine then milled from a single block of billet aluminum. The taillight's red acrylic lenses were also milled. The car's side trim (also CNC'd

ENGINE:

► The twin-turbo 6.15L V-8 from Gale Banks Engineering produces 1,150 hp with 925 lb-ft of torque (with 21 pounds of boost). To help smooth things up, the radiator fans are hidden in their own compartment.

BRIGHTWORK & TRIM:

► The car's aluminum side trim (CNC'd at Greening) overlaps at the door gap so it appears as one piece from a distance. Greening also fabbed the turn signals and running lights and milled the 19x8 and 20x12 wheels.

works via a Greening-machined aluminum filler piece finished with custom hard hose lines. Mark Bowler in Lawrenceville, Illinois, set up the 4L80E transmission, which was also deburred before it was painted a matte charcoal.

Both Matt and Jonathan and the Greenings had their hands full with creating all of the new metal pieces needed





TAILLIGHT:

➤ Carved from a single block of aluminum, the taillight housing also features a red acrylic lens that was milled. Note the spear coming off the edge of the ring continues across the back of the decklid and across to the other taillight.

UNDERCARRIAGE:

➤ A Moser 9-inch rear, triangulated suspension, RideTech coilover shocks, and SSBC 13.6-inch disc brakes are integral to the car's performance and complement the independent suspension used up front.

TRUNK:

The 'Bird's trunk area was smoothed out and redesigned, too, and includes a new latch mechanism and gas filler panel. The leather and carpet was stitched up by Paul Atkins Interiors.



aluminum) overlaps across the door gaps so it fools the eye into thinking it's one long piece, and mini T-bird logos were milled for both the leading section of the side trim and also for the interior's seat backs. The car's lighting is an electroluminescence system used in the taillights, side markers, turn and running lights, and at the end of the grille spear (where the top lens is a turn signal while the bottom lens is a running light). Greening also shortened the headlight rings by 1 inch and did the car's finish welding.

To make it a roller, Jonathan designed a concave seven-spoke wheel, and then gave the design to Greening so it could be worked up in CAD (computer aided drawing). From there a design was finalized, and then the wheels were milled in 19x8 and 20x12 sizes by Greening and chromed by Advanced Plating before being wrapped in Pirelli 235/35ZR19 and P-Zero 295/30ZR20 rubber.

The Greenings certainly understood the high standards the T-bird was being built to, and they didn't disappoint when it came to the paint and bodywork, either. Jeff used BASF paints, specifically the Glasurit 90 Line, when spraying the red and charcoal hues (in both gloss and matte) over the car and engine pieces, colors that easily complement the tones chosen for the interior.

For the car's cockpit, Paul Atkins Interiors covered the Jonathan-designed, Euro-inspired interior with an autumn and charcoal leather combination with a heavy stitching pattern. What you can't see is the Dynamat insulation, the wiring from American Autowire that was installed by Greening, and the air-conditioning system (yes, even though it's a roadster) was provided by Vintage Air. Fit and finish, important but even more so on a car going for the Ridler award, was handled by both Greenings, Steve Tracy of Advanced Plating, and, of course, the Peace brothers while the car went together.

Once finished and on display at the Detroit Autorama, the car was featured on four low-profile risers with both the hood and trunk barely cracked open for viewing. The idea was to keep the doors shut so the observer could drink in the car's lines without being distracted by the usual explosion of open doors, hood, trunk, and other display material. It was a bold move going with the subtle route, but one they believed was the right way to go based on the car's concept.

By Friday evening, the Peace family found out they did make the Pirelli Great 8 and, on Sunday afternoon, Jonathan, Matt, and their dad, Dwayne, all stood on stage with the other seven contenders as the



event organizers made their announcement: the little red T-bird had won the 2012 Don Ridler Memorial Award. In the next few months, the 'Bird continued to win major awards, including the Legend Cup at the Chicago World of Wheels, the Golden Builder award at the Hot Rod and Restoration Show in Indianapolis, named a

Custom Rod of the Year finalist at the Goodguys Nashville show, and the Chairman's Cup at the Concours d'Elegance Classy Chassis invitational in Houston. And it seems, as all the awards demonstrate, you really can improve on an iconic design if you have the talent to back it up. ●