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1 Dick Long's '37 cabriolet, featured in this issue, has a panel on the side of dash/console containing ignition, stereo, and A/C controls. Door handles are hidden underneath the dash. Sid Chavers covered Cerullo seats in saddle-colored leather. Mike Cooper's wood dash houses Classic Instruments gauges. The console hides the E-brake. 2 Ward Auto Interiors in Orangevale, CA, created the interior of Tom Compton's '46 Buick Super convertible. High-tech and nostalgia merge with stock gauges restored and updated by United Speedometer, plus a CD player with a pop-up screen. The woodgraining is hand-done by Fritz. 3 Eddie Potestio at Eddie's Rods and Customs in Pueblo West, CO, finished his wife Alisa's '66 Chevy Caprice in chamois Optima

**F**or some reason, many rodders and custom car folks seem to regard their interior as an afterthought. It may be the last job they tackle on their project car, or it may be the only part of a buildup that they hire out to a shop. While the interior is not what makes the first impression, it is what leaves a lasting impression. A well-done interior is one of the most important contributors to the overall success of the car. Not only that, the interior is the area of the finished rod or custom where you will be spending the majority of your time. Doesn't it deserve as much attention as the paint, the engine, the rolling stock, or any other area of your car?

The style of your car—and the interior—is a matter of individual taste. The overall approach you take with interior project will play a bigger role in the how well the job turns out. We talked to four of the leading interior guys in this hobby—Paul Atkins, Sid Chavers, Gabriel Lopez, and Ron Mangus—for ideas on how to improve your shot at a first-class cockpit. We also hit some shows for an eyeful of successful interiors.

## Have a Plan

All of the builders we talked to

# Inside Look

## Tips from the Pros for Interior Improvement

By Tim Bernsau, Dan Kahn, and Damon Lee

stressed the importance of going into a project with a vision of the completed car. One of the most common mistakes, according to Gabe Lopez, is not planning the interior before you start. Winging it as you go is a good way to guarantee a project that will take longer, cost more, and look bad. If you want a stereo in the car, figure out where the speakers will be. Do the same with handles, controls, vents—anything that could interfere with the design if not planned ahead of time. Ron Mangus has seen beautiful door panels ruined by mis-

placed window switches and handles.

One way to avoid this problem is by creating a concept drawing before you start. Most high-roller rodders always begin with an illustration. You don't need to hire Chip Foose or Steve Stanford, just somebody talented enough to transfer your ideas onto paper. Paul Atkins suggests taking photographs of interiors you like at car shows, or cutting them out of *R&C*, to show to your upholstery guy as a guide. Another advantage of a concept illustration is that it can prevent you from changing your mind during the course of





Ultraleather and perforated Wheat Ultrasuede. Other touches include Palamino wool carpet and seats from Interior Supply and Service. ④ We've been noticing more upholstery jobs like the pleated metallic red vinyl boat material, used in Todd Gold's Model A tub. It's nostalgic and easy to take care of. ⑤ John D'Agostino's customs always manage to combine nostalgia and elegance. Bob Divine Custom Interiors in Martinez, CA, covered the cockpit of this '58 Cadillac Brougham in pearl white vinyl with mint velvet accents.

the project. Trends come and go quickly, and without a blueprint, car owners can be tempted to chase after every passing fad.

## Stick to the Plan

Maintaining the theme of the car inside and out is a rule many people forget. Sid Chavers called it the biggest mistake rodders make. "Sometimes a guy builds a traditional car with steel wheels and door hinges and then wants to add a smooth, high-tech interior, or he builds a smoothie car and then wants a tuck 'n' roll job. It doesn't look right."

Atkins agrees. "Think in terms of the whole package. The inside should match the outside. Billet knobs don't belong on a resto car, they belong on a high-tech car. It's all got to work together. I ask a lot of questions before I do an interior. 'Does it have door handles on it?' 'Does it have billet wheels?' 'Does it have wide whites?'"

"When I design an interior, I walk around the car," Gabe told us. "I find out what kind of inside door handles it has, the body style, the shape of the car. I start with the door panels, and from there I design the seats and the rest of the interior."

Mangus calls it working from the soul

of the car. "Pay attention to the characteristics of the car to make everything go together. If you know the theme, you can incorporate it into the project." For a '30 Plymouth with a Viper motor, he added some snakeskin material to follow the whole Viper theme.

Color is as important as the theme. Mangus recommends having the painter spray a piece of metal that can be used by the upholstery shop to match colors and has even known builders to mix paint based on the interior colors. Atkins prefers simple, solid color schemes inside if the outside has flames or other multiple-color paint. If the car is a solid color on the outside, you can try two tones on the inside. Chavers' advice is: Avoid trendy colors which will quickly go out of style, in favor of colors that will look good for many years, especially if you're planning to sell the car at some time.

## Finding the Right Shop

Probably the best way to find a good interior shop is by asking other rodders. Chavers recommends using a shop that specifically caters to street rods. General upholstery shops may seem like a bargain, but if the interior builder doesn't understand street rods, the extra hours

required to finish the job could cost a lot. In addition, an experienced street rod interior guy can provide more ideas on styling and design.

## Get the Shop Involved

Pro builders stress the importance of involving the interior shop from the beginning. Mangus and others like to start working on a car by the time it's in primer. "If you can incorporate the interior guy into the whole project instead of at the end, it makes for a much better overall car. We're good at what we do. To make us better, make us part of the entire project. There are a lot of times when you might need an extra piece of metal to attach a panel to, or you need some structural support to hook panels to. It's easier to do that at the time of fabrication. Fiberglass cars frequently have no headliner bows, things like that. If I'm drilling holes and getting metal shavings, it's okay to get it on the primer, but when you've got to work around fresh paint, it's a lot more difficult."

## Think Ahead

Just like with paint, doing some of the interior prep work before your car goes to the shop can save time and money. Chavers suggests taking the car to the



interior guy and asking him what fabrication and construction can be done before starting the upholstery job. Mangus mentioned filling holes in the floor and welding floor brackets in place. Insulating behind the A/C before it's installed and upholstering the dash before wiring the instrument panel goes in can help keep the upholsterer from having to tear the interior apart later. Routing wiring through the center console instead of along the floor will eliminate a bulky bunch of wires along the floor when it's time to lay carpet. Mounting window switches and other controls under the dash instead of on the door panels makes the look of the interior much cleaner. If you are building a custom console, don't make it so elaborate that the upholsterer can't cover it. "Think ahead to the upholsterer's portion of the project" is Atkins' practical advice.

### Be Seated

Seat selection is a critical area when

building an interior, for reasons that become obvious if you make the wrong choice. In addition to selecting seats based on the overall look of the car (it's hard to make a late-model junkyard seat look nostalgic) rodders have to consider proper seat position. The angle and mounting height affect driver and passenger comfort, as well as the appearance of the car. Make sure your seat provides adequate leg, rear, and back support. In a roadster, your head should be positioned below the windshield. In a coupe or sedan, adequate headroom is an obvious requirement. Many top-end interior shops build their own custom seats or use seats from high-quality aftermarket companies like Glide and Cerullo which offer a large variety of styles and applications. If you choose wrecking yard seats, take them for a seat-of-the-pants test ride by sitting in them for as long as possible before you buy them. If more than one person will be driving your rod, consider seats with sliders.

### Learn from Pros

There are all kinds of instructional books on upholstery and interior tech available for rodders ready to tackle the job. Sid Chavers offers a series of four videos entitled "Street Rod Interiors," which cover the subjects of panels, seats, headliners and carpets, and tops. These can be ordered directly from his Web site.

Custom Auto Interiors carries the *Automotive Upholstery Handbook*, written by Don Taylor. This 200-plus-page book explains how to create and install interiors, how to use tools and sewing machines, how to form fiberglass, and a lot more. For a more in-depth look at customizing interiors, check out *Custom Auto Interiors*, co-authored by Ron Mangus and Don Taylor. Both are available from the Custom Auto Interiors Web site.

Many vocational schools and community colleges offer classes on automotive upholstery, which are generally inexpensive and typically taught by professionals in the industry.

### Budget Alternatives

"People put a lot of money into the engine and paint, and then when they get to the interior, they don't want to



6 The entire interior of this Shoebox Chevy has been completely reworked, including filling and sculpting the dash, adding digital gauges, fabricating a center console, and installing hidden air conditioning. Sculpted and painted sheetmetal can add an awesome high-tech look to a contemporary rod. 7 The insane Tri-Five interior is covered with fresh leather, suede, and various other forms of cowhide. The body color front-and-rear-matching consoles are tied to the interior with tribal graphics sewn into the center seat inserts. Consoles serve the double purpose of practicality and providing something to go between the buckets. 8 This Model T track roadster subscribes to the bare bones school of racing interiors, including lots of bare aluminum, a pair of nicely finished little bucket seats, and a Sprint Car-style steering wheel. It doesn't get much cooler. 9 This is the contemporary look at its finest. The otherwise standard '32 dash looks wild with a custom aluminum and leather art deco insert. Cream gauge faces, surrounded by tan hide that matches the wheel and seats, tie everything together.





10 Auburn inserts have been popular on Deuce dashes since the '40s. Resembling the instrument panel of a WWII fighter plane, they lend style and a touch of flash to an otherwise sedate interior. Keeping with the period theme, this roadster owner also added a Stewart-Warner curved glass tach.

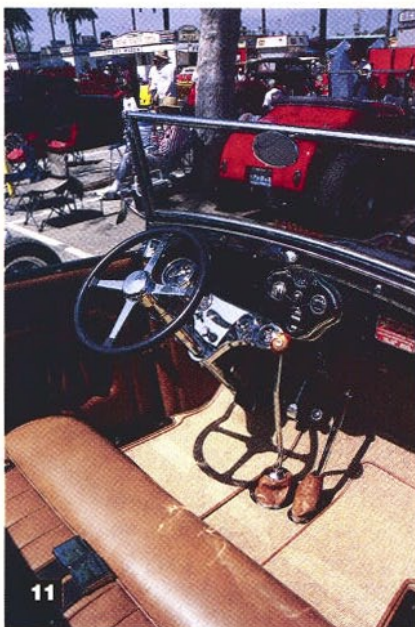
11 Jim Hartman designed his gauge panel over a Mullins column drop and added Stewart-Warner gauges. The original Model A speedo and roller fuel gauge, a Bell wheel, old-style rolls 'n' pleats, an early shifter, a starter button, and a genuine Russetta timing tag maintain the look of this '29 roadster, first built in 1948. The original carpet was replaced with European square weave.

12 This crazy custom roadster pickup combines custom seats and console with an Oldsmobile steering wheel and speedometer, plus a cool rocket shifter knob. Nothing deviates from the overall theme of the car.

13 Don Marrah went super smooth and high-tech with Matthew Grady's '35 Chevy cabriolet but covered the floor in commercial vinyl. It looks techy but is low-buck and, uncharacteristically, pretty practical since it's so easy to clean.

14 A '60 Chevy dash filled with VDO gauges sets off the interior of Damon Estes' '46 Ford convertible, which is upholstered in red Naugahyde. It also has a Colorado Custom steering wheel and an AM/FM/cassette player with remote CD changer.

15 The interior of this '32 coupe (part of Mike Griffith's collection profiled in this issue) was done in 1963, including Benny Store's hand-built buckets with black and turquoise button-tuck Naugahyde. Instruments are '41 Buick. The steering wheel is from an International truck. A CB radio was added in the '70s.



spend as much money—and start cutting corners,” Gabe observed. Each of the upholsterers we spoke to is a leader in this hobby and has finished some elite-level cars. Realistically, the typical rodder may be looking for some shortcuts to keep his budget in check without sacrificing too much quality. Gabe recommended looking at some of the imitation material available nowadays. Vinyls and imitation leathers, such as Ultrasuede and Ultraleather, can

be cheaper than the real stuff and, in the hands of a talented stitcher, can look great. Imitation exotic skins, including faux ostrich, snake, and alligator are also available today. There are even vinyls created to resemble carbon fiber, for a fraction of the cost. RodDoors has a number of products in addition to its door panel line that are a quality alternative for mid-budget rodders, especially those building their own interiors. **R&C**

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