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Conversations with People We Value #11

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A few years back I had been asked to judge at a local Concours d'Elegance. I envisioned strolling across lovely grounds viewing a field of beautiful cars. What fun! My judging assignment included an aircooled class comprised primarily of Volkswagens. More fun!

Judging criteria for this concours would employ "French Rules." Compared to the judging at marquee club events (Porsche Club, Corvette Club) where the wrong oil breather cap can hurt your score, French Rules lean more on aesthetics.

With French Rules, visual impact more than technical authenticity holds sway. Additional attributes that merit judgments of worthiness include a car's condition, authenticity, originality, quality of restoration, rarity, and historical importance. Basically French Rules creates a personal opinion beauty contest with the benefit of a few qualifiers to assist judges in thin slicing degrees of excellence to substantiate the choice of a winning car. I had no idea that I was about to face the challenge of thin slicing with a scalpel.

My partnering judge and I approached our subject cars and immediately recognized the challenge. With late 1950s being the newest model year, a splendid array of highly desirable VW Beetles awaited our scrutiny. It could only be compared to judging a beauty contest with the five finalists being striking identical quintuplets.

Each of the five VW Beetles enjoyed exquisite restorations featuring superb aesthetics clearly executed with an artist's eye. All five Beetles showcased the craftsmanship of the same man. His name? Chris Vallone.

**VW bug restoration is no joke.
Ask Jerry Seinfeld**



Being an accomplished independent film maker with a background in cartooning and fine art seems an unlikely route to becoming recognized world over for producing mechanically superior and aesthetically refined Volkswagen Beetle restorations.

"I was living my dream," says Chris Vallone, founder of [Classic VW Bugs, Inc.](#) in Congers New York. For ten years after earning his degree, Chris wrote, directed, shot, produced and edited his own independent films. "Action films, horror films, that sort of thing," says Chris. He achieved a degree of success with one of his films being picked up for distribution internationally. However, recognition does not necessarily equate to financial success.

In the background during the decade dedicated to advancing his career in film making, Chris enjoyed a hobby defined by maintaining his 1968 Volkswagen. "Honestly, I loved the image of the artist throwing his gear in his VW bug and pursuing his passion," says Chris.

In life as in a good film, inflection points occur that force a dramatic change in the action. Chris's life plot took a major turn when the monetary demands of distributing a film exceeded his financial reach. Translation, Chris found himself broke and in debt. "The whole starving artist thing," says Chris.

"I realized that my Hollywood aspirations should be pushed to a back burner," Says Chris. Actually Chris pushed the Hollywood idea right off the stove. "As I approached my late 20s, I realized that I needed to get serious about making a decent living to survive," says Chris. Step one called for eliminating my debts.

Chris's hobby came to the rescue. He would sell the 1968 VW he had restored. He used his filmmaking skills to showcase the Bug on eBay. This happened way before video became a staple on Bring-a-Trailer.com auctions. It was way before BaT existed.

His VW quickly sold to a buyer from Cincinnati, Ohio. Chris says, "This floored me because I grew up in a world where everything happened locally. What an eye opener for me." This was around 2003.



Chris and father with award winning 1952 split window

Chris's father, Chris Vallone senior, saw an



BEFORE - 1956 Ragtop



AFTER - 1956 Ragtop

opportunity saying "We got something here." And indeed they did. Chris senior had decades as an experienced mechanic. Chris junior possessed an artist's eye for visual interior and exterior executions. Their blended talents would combine to impart a unique and striking signature look to their future creations.

Working out of their home's one-car garage, they would first rebuild a VW Bug to use and then sell it. However, within a year Chris decided to buy a Beetle with the sole intent of restoring and flipping it. Son and father went all in. With the VW Bug completed, Chris created a full blown sales video with music, titles and effects and posted it on eBay.

Incredulously Chris says, "We had people come to our house, knock on the door and ask us to end the auction saying "I want to buy it now." Time for another inflection point.

In a move of profound significance, Chris redirected his marketing media skills to a new platform, YouTube. He now employed his talents to fully orchestrate traditional and social media platforms. That's when it happened. People began calling. Interested customers no longer wanted to bid on a VW Bug Chris put up for auction. They wanted Chris to build one just for them. Chris says, "I never ever thought of doing that."



Classic VW Bugs facility

Chris pivoted his business to embrace the custom Build-a-Bug philosophy. Classic VW Bugs, Inc. was born. Chris had discovered a niche within a niche populated with people in their fifties to seventies possessing the money to have their VW Bug professionally restored with a visual character attuned to their tastes.

Clearly, having outgrown the garage, son and father took a deep breath, swallowed their trepidations and leased a

significantly larger commercial space. Game on.

Despite launching Classic VW Bugs at the dawn of the Financial Crisis, Chris has never looked back. Counter intuitively, as the stock market collapsed, his business grew. Chris explains this saying, "People buying our cars were primarily investors or collectors who wanted to add to their collection. They viewed our restored VW Bugs as an appreciating asset."

While the sweet spot of the buyer demographic presently rests in the fifty to seventy age range, Chris has witnessed a surge of interest by those in their thirties and forties.



Chris sees this trend inspired by a motivation quite different from say the muscle car or resto-mod markets. He says, "To a significant degree it is nostalgia driven." Chris senior says, "People's youthful personal experiences wove the Beetle into the fabric of their soul. It remains there today."

When asked about the pivotal moment when Chris realized that Classic VW Bugs, Inc. had arrived as a presence in the international Beetle

restoration community, he did not hesitate. "When Jerry Seinfeld walked through the door," says Chris.

About seven or eight years ago, Chris answered a call from a guy introducing himself as Jerry Seinfeld. He wanted to discuss a prospective Beetle restoration. Chris's initial response was, "Yeh right, who is this?" However, as a big Seinfeld fan, Chris recognized the caller's intonation. Seinfeld brought a 1956 Beetle requiring significant work to Chris's shop and hung out for a while to discuss the project.

After taking delivery of the completed Beetle, Chris did not hear from Seinfeld again until this past summer when a clearly satisfied Seinfeld brought another Beetle to Chris's shop. Chris took the opportunity to ask Seinfeld how he found Classic VW Bugs. Chris says, "Sure enough it was YouTube."

Chris has posted over 600 videos on YouTube. Every one laser focused on Beetle restoration. He gets over a million hits a month. At times Chris

senior will ask his son why he works so hard posting on YouTube. Chris says, "Google searching is the key. I truly believe that if I didn't do the videos, we wouldn't have the work." Twenty percent of Classic VW Bugs business is international, the rest comes primarily from the south and west." Very little is local.



As the interview approached its conclusion, I called attention to a weathered black VW Bug convertible off on the side that appeared more well used than abused. Chris responded with a look of un-reconciled indecision. Clearly this Bug had a story.

Chris explained, "It is a 1954 one-owner, all original, numbers matching rare gem. No accidents. Everything

lines up perfectly.” Roughly 900 new 1954 Beetles were sold in the U.S. market. Only a few were convertibles.



About five years ago Chris got a call from the son of the original owner. He told Chris that he wanted to sell it, but only wanted it to go to a good home. Chris bought it and has wrestled with its fate ever since. Chris says, “I want to restore it and bring it back to its glory.” But then Chris recognizes that it enjoys a glorious patina and is fundamentally sound enough that, with a little structural work, it can be cleaned up and driven as an original. Chris says that he has always wanted a survivor.

What do you think he should do? Should this be the one?

Help Chris make up his mind. Chris will read your comments.

By [Burton Hall](#) | October 29th, 2020 | [Conversations With People We Value](#) | [11 Comments](#)

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Eddie Heironimus October 29, 2020 at 2:28 pm - [Reply](#)

Such a great read brother, love the work you guys are doing. I gotta say it's so rare to find an all original that old in such great shape. With all the awesome restorations you've done, I think it would be cool to just clean it up and keep it original petina.

Just my opinion, but whatever you do I'm sure it will look great. Thanks for always answering email and helping me with my 63 restoration!



Burton Hall October 29, 2020 at 3:32 pm - [Reply](#)

Thank you for your comments. Good luck with the '63.



Chris Sheldrick October 29, 2020 at 3:30 pm - [Reply](#)

Chris should sell me the 54 vert so i can slam it to the ground and put a BIG engine in it 😊 Purists will HATE me.



Burton Hall October 29, 2020 at 3:35 pm - [Reply](#)

Clearly you are not in the undecided column. Thanks for the comment.



David Tookmanian October 29, 2020 at 4:12 pm - [Reply](#)

Thanks Burton , A survivor is only a survivor once in its lifetime .Clean the glass , vacuum the carpets, leave the dust . pray for no rust .



Burton Hall October 29, 2020 at 4:16 pm - [Reply](#)

As a dyed in the wool classic car guy, your perspective is appreciated.



Tim Scwhartz October 30, 2020 at 12:24 pm - [Reply](#)

There aren't many survivors out there, so I'd keep it as original as possible and drive it. If I wanted a fully restored car, I'd start with one that needed it. As to the person who wants to slam it, there are plenty of 1960's and 1970's bugs out there that need lots of work, since you don't want something anywhere close to stock, start with one of those.



Burton Hall October 30, 2020 at 2:41 pm - [Reply](#)

Survivors are indeed glorious time machines. Thank you for your comments.

Tom October 30, 2020 at 6:55 pm - [Reply](#)



No way , Chris. Clean it up good and drive it. There's nothing better than a good patina on a survivor.



Burton Hall October 30, 2020 at 8:14 pm - [Reply](#)

Another checked box in the "it's only original once" column.



Mark October 31, 2020 at 6:21 pm - [Reply](#)

This is brilliant. One of my favorite topics, too. Time to investigate YouTube!

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Contact the blogger:

burton@drivin-news.com

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