

THE  
OCTANE  
INTERVIEW

# Andy Saunders

*The UK's most famous custom car builder has well over 60 vehicles to his name – and he's not finished yet*

Words and portrait Mark Dixon

Andy Saunders is shaking his head in mild disbelief. 'It was the end of an exhibition in a London art gallery,' he says, 'where I'd been invited to debut my Stratos Zero replica. I got talking with a guy who'd also had a car on show, a full-size model of a car he'd designed. Admittedly, it looked quite good but it didn't move, it had no interior, no steering or suspension – it just sat there.'

'This guy asked me "Why do you do it? The money you must spend..." I said, "Well, the Zero owes me 25 grand." "What part owes you 25 grand?" "All of it! Including tax and MoT." And it turned out he'd spent something like £400,000 having his model built. I just couldn't work it out. When I built *Run-A-Ground*, my three-wheeler speedboat, I bought a Reliant chassis for a tenner, the boat for 300 quid, the wheels from a council tip for a fiver, and I used some paint I happened to have on the shelf. The whole thing cost me £836.'

That anecdote is telling in more ways than one. Saunders has been building custom vehicles since the late 1970s, always on a hobby basis – his day job is managing the garage business started by his late father – and he's always taken a DIY, use-what-comes-to-hand approach. All of his 60-plus creations have been made in an ordinary domestic garage and with simple hand tools. No expensive wheeling machines here; just a hammer and a dolly.

'I did buy a wheeling machine once,' Saunders confesses. 'An old panel-beater was retiring and he had several 19th Century examples, massive great things. I bought one off him but never had the time to learn to use it and in the end I sold it to a mate.' When

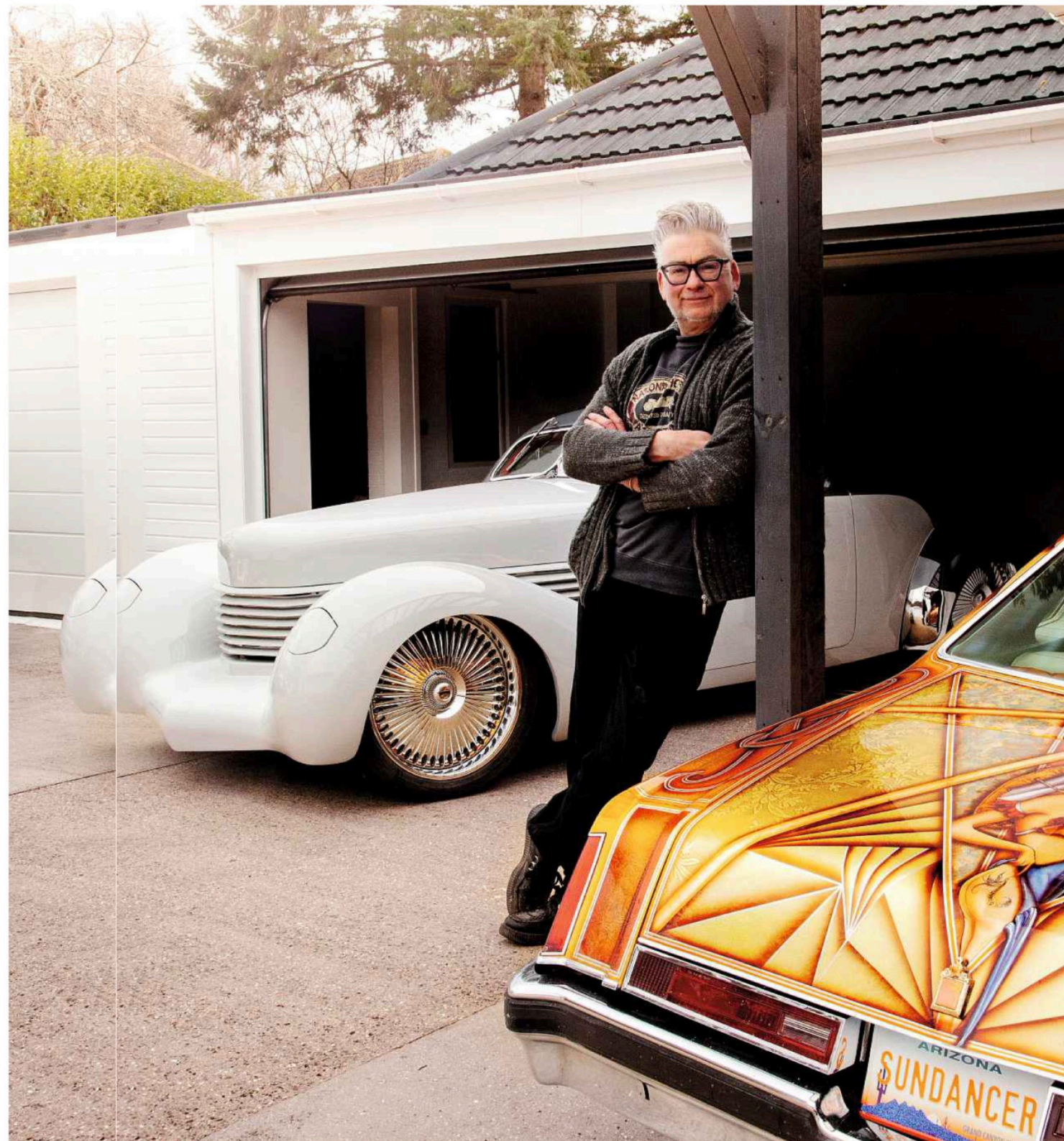
it's suggested that his method of panel-shaping is very much in the Italian tradition, using a hammer over a buck, he laughs and quips: 'More like a hammer over a bucket!'

For anyone who wasn't around at the time, it's hard now to imagine what a massive part of popular culture custom cars were in the UK during the 1970s and '80s. Magazines such as *Street Machine* were regularly selling over 200,000 copies a month, figures unimaginable today. Saunders agrees that much of the appeal was the sheer sense of fun that permeated the scene: 'That's what it was all about. Everyone is too serious these days, aren't they?'

Serious is one thing that Saunders is not. While he's been all over the world to exhibit his vehicles, he's lived all his life within a few hundred yards of where he was born in Poole, Dorset, and it's impossible not to warm to his soft Dorset burr. A visiting Frenchman wrote afterwards: 'His accent was like that of a farmer, like the farmers in the Pyrenees... a bit like talking with a hot potato in your mouth.'

Incidentally, the Frenchman became a close friend who bought one of Saunders' builds and raced it on the Bonneville salt flats: a Reliant Rialto silhouette streamliner called *Saline Warrior* that squeezed 145mph from its 750cc engine. Of course.

Saunders' good humour does not mean he's led a charmed life. He had an extremely close relationship with his father, who ran a used car sales business, and when his father died from leukaemia in 2008 Saunders found himself bereft. 'I'd never experienced death before – my grandparents had died when I was too young to remember. I'd never really been out of his sight and it messed me up completely.'





Clockwise, from below  
Saunders' first car, *Bird Puller*, built when he was 15;  
Escort-based *Exquisite Dream* was magazine-featured  
when he was 18; Mercury-lookalike Volvo *Rainbow  
Chaser* remains a favourite; *Run-A-Ground* road-legal  
speedboat proved a handful in corners; *Claustrophobia*  
and *Mini Ha Ha* were particularly memorable Minis.



# TRICK TRUCK

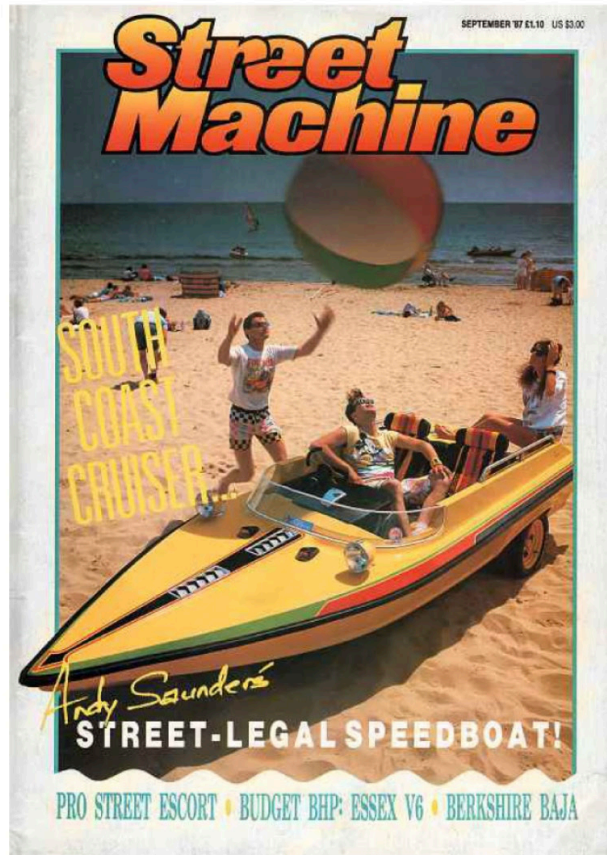
STREET MACHINE OCTOBER 1981

This Pop's Poole put-together is the first of its kind

WHY, I ask, I ask, has it taken so long for...  
...a 'good four inch deep' - on one...  
...there is usually a 600 400 18 year old...  
...Andy Saunders' personal diary driver, would it...  
...This rather special 'trick' represents...  
...Andy's second Escort and his first 'automotive...  
...offer'. The fourth, a Volvo leaded, is already...  
...under way and that's not to mention a one...  
...owner Mk1 Zesty and an all day '833...  
...which he's got tucked away at the bottom of the...  
...garden. Yep, they name 'em young ones on...  
...the South Coast - you may remember his...  
...father's 'Jagged Edge' 3.0 custom coupe in...  
...years back. But Andy Saunders was a card-cut...  
...impression by the way, which kind of explains...  
...why his employees are so like, cut, crazy.

Andy's far-fetched notion actually evolved...  
...last November while poring together a 1/24th...  
...scale Starline 'trapper' - this was just after he

Andy Saunders' Volvo



'I HADN'T LEARNED TO WELD;  
WE USED SO MANY POP-RIVETS  
IT LOOKED LIKE WE WERE DOING  
PIECEWORK FOR BOEING'

This experience led to a dark period in Saunders' life from which he reckons it took ten years to recover. But, following an in-depth exploration of alternative therapies and meditation, he regained his equilibrium. Part of that is due to his relationship with his partner, Maxine, a talented painter who is also an air-brush artist: she did the artwork on *Sundancer*, the 1977 Buick Regal low-rider just visible in the foreground on the previous page. Saunders himself was at a serious risk of dying at a young age when, aged 15, he was diagnosed with a large hole in his heart. It required a major operation and, to keep his spirits up, Saunders' dad decided they were going to build a custom car based on a Mk1 Ford Escort that he'd taken in part-exchange. The result was *Bird Puller*, pictured here, at top.

Saunders agrees that the name - derived from an exhaust manufacturer's advert, which featured a sexy, pouting 'policewoman' with the slogan 'Don't let that blowing exhaust make you a Bird Puller' - would hardly be acceptable today. But he laments the fact that the tradition of giving names to customs has fallen out of fashion. 'Some of them were really clever, such as Ray Christopher's *Past-Your-Eyes Express* - a 1952 milk float that was powered by a supercharged V8. I still love naming my cars, and if anyone mentions a car from 40 or 50 years ago by name then everyone knows instantly what they're talking about, whereas with some more recent cars they're saying "Well, it's the black Model B with the five-spoke wheels but not the American Racing ones" and in ten years' time

no-one will have a clue which was which.' *Bird Puller*, completed in 1979, was very much of its time, as were Saunders' later teenage creations such as *Exquisite Dream*, centre top of this spread. This striking pick-up was based on a ropey Mk1 Escort van. 'At this point I hadn't learned to weld, but that didn't stop me,' he recalls. 'The truck sides and back panel of the cab were formed out of sheet aluminium, which we fixed to the frame using pop rivets - in fact we used so many rivets it looked like we were doing piecework for Boeing. The curve in the back of the cab was achieved by rolling the aluminium sheet over a large orange propane bottle.' The result was good enough to earn Saunders his first full feature in a magazine, the October 1981 issue of *Street Machine*. He was just 18.

Beginning to stretch his wings, Saunders' next car was *Rainbow Chaser*, a '50s-style lead-sled built on a two-door Volvo Amazon (above). '*Rainbow Chaser* was my first car to be invited to a foreign show and became the car I loved more than any other. I owned her for 22 years and through three transitions.' Then came *Mini Ha Ha* (opposite page, bottom left), a radically shortened Mini that helped propel Saunders into the national consciousness when it appeared on BBC TV's *Top Gear* in 1983. It, and the aforementioned *Run-A-Ground* road-going speedboat (left), are the creations that even car enthusiasts with no interest in customs may remember. During filming for *Jeremy Clarkson's Motorworld* show, Saunders was tasked with racing his speedboat against a motorised sofa (built by a young Edd China), garden shed and skip. While out-braking the skip into a chicane,





MATT RICHARDSON



MIKE KEY



MATT WOODS

## 'I WAS ABOUT TO CHEESE-GRATE MY BODY ACROSS A RACETRACK UNDER A CAPSIZED BOAT'

Saunders realised a flaw in his plan: *Run-A-Ground* was a three-wheeler. 'The boat started to roll and, for a split-second, I thought it was all over; I was just about to cheese-grate my body across an asphalt racetrack while being mashed into the surface by a capsized boat.'

Fortunately, the speedboat eventually righted itself and Saunders later practised the two-wheeling manoeuvre on a local industrial estate '...until I could do it on tap, as at traffic lights it did look pretty damn cool.'

As his skills developed and his tastes matured, Saunders explored a huge variety of different genres in his car building. US concepts of the 1950s and '60s became an obsession and led to ambitious creations such as his replica of Alex Tremulis' 1958 Ford X-2000 (left). His restoration of the original 1957 Aurora 'Safety Car' (top right) was even more of a labour of love. Left outside for decades behind a US body shop, it proved a severe challenge.

'When it arrived at my house, I was dismayed, most of it having become compost in a field in Connecticut. I had no concept of the amount of wood used in its construction.' But then he was invited to display the as-yet-unrestored Aurora, along with his previous builds *Indecision* – a space-age, bat-winged super-coupe based on a Citroën CX – and the X-2000 at 2004's Goodwood Festival of Speed.

'I work really long hours when I have to but the Aurora became a joke. Seven months of 12-hour days, seven days a week, was ridiculous. The biggest problem was the windscreen. Just three weeks before the show, there was no option but to make our own from poured resin between two moulds, just as was done in 1957. They were not brilliant but they were 98%



Clockwise, from near left 1957 Aurora Safety Car was restored from derelict condition; 2CV Picasso is surely one of Saunders' cleverest creations; 1937 Cord 812 sedan, rusted-out and minus its original engine and transmission, was reworked to become the *Tetanus* coupe; Ford X-2000 replica has been featured in 49 newspapers and magazines; Art Deco-styled *Metropolis* was built on the wreck of a Peugeot 202 pick-up, left to decompose in a hedge after World War Two for 65 years.

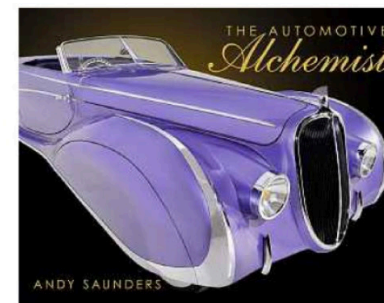
clear. Frankly, if we'd opened the moulds to find them looking like snow domes, we would still have fitted them as time had run out.'

Cars of the Art Deco era are another Saunders passion. His most recent build – and, he reckons, his best yet – is *Déjà*, a Riley RM-based creation that stars on the cover of his newly released autobiography (below right). Typically, it came about through a chance find of some Delahaye 135M wings at the Beaulieu Autojumble. 'I had no idea what I would do with them but I was filled with passion for French Deco, so I designed *Déjà* in a style that was a mix of Saoutchik and Figoni et Falaschi.'

For his next project Saunders is returning to his love of US concept cars. 'I've wanted to build a replica of the 1971 Ford Tridon for a long time and then someone offered me a 1974 Lincoln Continental for not much money. I've been constantly thinking how to do it and the actual work will only take about three months.'

The ill-informed sometimes accuse Saunders of butchering rare classics such as the Cord 812 (on left) that became his *Tetanus* coupe. But he will never cut up something rare or potentially restorable – the Cord had lost all its original mechanics, was abandoned on the Yorkshire moors for 30 years, and was so rusty that a friend exclaimed on seeing it: 'I'm not touching that without having an effing tetanus jab!' Hence the name. Which is why he won't be customising a rough but savable 1962 Austin Mini Countryman woodie.

'My mum had a car identical to this, in the same Iris Blue. This one is going to be restored exactly as it was.' **Cad**



**BUY THE BOOK**  
Images and information in this feature are from Andy Saunders' new book, *The Automotive Alchemist*, published by Dalton Watson at £90. See page 156 for a full review and information.