



# Rufus III

By Benjamin Hunting Photos John Parli

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One of the great things about heading on down to a local cruise night or car show in the Chicagoland area is that you stand a good chance of coming across a genuine piece of automotive history. Such is the case with any of the hundreds of custom car fans who have been lucky enough to run across John Possedi's "Rufus" car during his many years of dedicated ownership.

This unique artifact from hot rodding's early days began its life as a humble 1951 Chevrolet coupe – that is, until famed builder Darryl Starbird got his hands on it. Starbird was a pioneering force in the world of custom cars, putting together famed vehicles such as LePerle (based on a '57 Thunderbird) and the Predicta bubble top car. Eventually, Starbird would partner with Monogram to create 15 original model

kits based on his hot rod designs, an interesting side note to a career that would see him continue to tour with his full-scale cars for decades before founding the national Rod and Custom Car Hall of Fame Museum, located in Oklahoma. Half of the museum's 50 resident cars were originally built by Daryl Starbird.

According to Possedi, Starbird initially customized the front and rear of Rufus before taking the Chevrolet to several custom car shows over the course of the next few years. In 1957, the car was chopped and sectioned and of course painted a brand new color – a yearly repaint was part and parcel of Starbird's hot rodding habits. By 1963, the coupe had made its way to Chicago where another hot rod icon, Roger Lick, would install a completely new custom interior. The impetus behind the rede-

sign was the 1964-65 World's Fair in New York City. Although Rufus suffered its share of indignities on its way to the event (having unexpectedly slid off its trailer en route and come to rest in a convenient cornfield – a near-disaster not discovered until the car's custodians were another 80 miles down the road), it proved to be a big hit amongst attendees.

As with many custom show cars of its era, after the World's Fair the '51 Chevrolet was sold to an owner who relieved it of its drivetrain and then proceeded to ignore it for several years. By the time current owner John Possedi came across the vehicle it was sitting behind a local gas station, completely exposed to the elements. The owners of the business had lost their lease on the land, and knowing that John was the kind of guy who was interested in

these types of custom car projects they called him up to ask him if he wanted to save the vehicle from heading to the scrap yard. Possedi responded in the affirmative, and took possession of the car in 1968.

The most recent restoration of Rufus occurred in 2009, which is when it acquired its current distinctive orange paint job. Possedi said that the automobile has gone through many different iterations since it was first built, with the only original components left on the car being the roof and the rear window. That being said, the vehicle stayed Chevrolet through and through, with no components from other brands being grafted onto its original body – just the custom, hand-formed work of many different teams of dedicated craftsmen shaping the fins, front end and everything else on the car.

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For the 2009 restoration, the entire car was stripped, which was when John and his team (made up of his cousin and his son) discovered only a single, tiny rust spot, which was ground down and taken care of immediately. Possedi refers to Rufus as the "last of the lead sleds," as the car was fully leaded and welded with no other types of filler used during the restoration. This was part of a concerted effort made to ensure that all of the techniques used during the restoration matched those that had originally been employed when the car was first built. John also completely reupholstered the vehicle's interior, maintaining the Roger Lick design but updating the materials. The Chevy's passenger compartment is absolutely unique and is a perfect representation of the era it was originally customized in. Under the hood, Rufus now sports a 305 Chevrolet V8, a replacement for the original 265 block that had served as its prime motivator for several years.

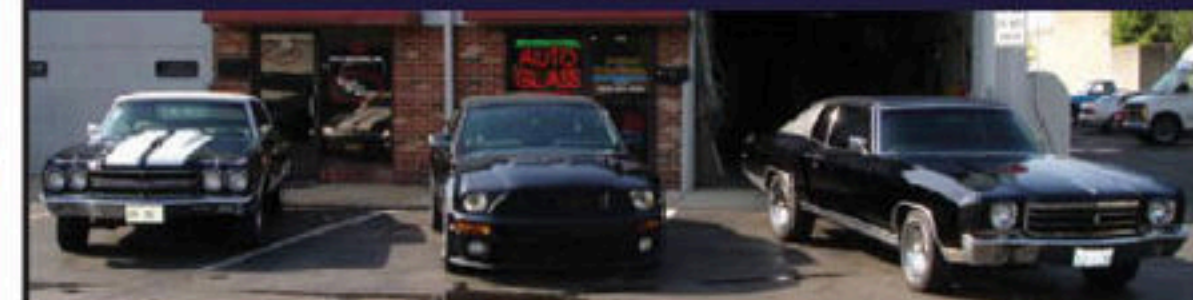


700R4 automatic transmission sends the engine's output to the rear wheels.

John has number of other rods and customs populating an eclectic stable of fun and unusual rides, and he is certainly no stranger to the collector car scene. As to the origins of his Starbird Chevrolet's distinctive name? "In 1956 I bought a '33 Plymouth," recounts Possedi. "On the side it said Rufus 1. My next car was a 1927 Model T, and I decided to name it Rufus 2. By the time the Starbird car came along, Rufus 3 seemed like a natural fit."



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