

# V.I.G Paul Brian

By Benjamin Hunting

You don't have to cast your net too far in the Chicagoland to snag someone whose contributions to the local car scene make them a Very Important Gearhead (V.I.G.). Recently, we caught up with broadcaster and dedicated champion of Chicago automotive culture Paul Brian. Paul took the time to speak with us about his passion for motorsports and his own love affair with all things mechanical, a relationship that began so many years ago as a young child under the tutelage of a similarly besotted father.

"My father was a mild-mannered pharmacist," recalls Brian, "but he always owned interesting cars." Paul's father would park a succession of muscle cars in the family driveway during the 1960s and 70s, with Paul's first real automotive memory being that of a 1964 Pontiac Catalina Ventura with a burgundy finish and a tri power 421 under the hood. A pair of GTO's followed soon after, and not to be left out, Paul's mother also got in on the lead foot act with a 1967 Chevrolet Malibu 396 SS convertible.

That Brian had access to the American metal belonging to his parents took some of the sting out of rule imposed by his father that both he and his brother would have to wait until they were finished college before they could own cars of their own. Paul's father also assuaged his son's burning desire for a car to call his own in other ways, such as their annual pilgrimage together to the Chicago Auto Show. The patriarch would show up at the school attended by the brothers, scoop them out of class and then the three of them would hit the town dressed to the nines intent on enjoying the spectacle of the show itself as

well as a spectacular dinner that evening at one of the city's finer restaurants.

While both the Chicago Auto Show and the gearhead tendencies transmitted to Paul Brian through the DNA of his parents gave him his early interest in the automotive world, it was an experience at a race at Road America in 1964 that would sink its claws into him and ignite a passion for racing that would come to define his perspective on automobiles for the rest of his life. Seeing the Ferrari 250 LM piloted by Augie Pabst at Elkhart Lake walk away with that day's win sent Brian down a path that would blend together the auto industry and his career as a radio and television broadcaster for the next several decades.

Paul Brian has spent the past thirty years as an active force in both the Chicago-area car scene and in international racing, combining a slew of radio hosting gigs with a three year stint with the Alfa Romeo IndyCar team, which operated between 1989 and 1991 and which included drivers Al Unser, Sr. and Roberto Guerrero on its roster. He then was a crucial part of the team that brought the IndyCar Radio Network to life after his time at Alfa Romeo was complete.

Today, most Chicago residents are no doubt familiar with Brian through his Drive Chicago radio program that airs on WLS AM 890 each and every Saturday morning. The award-winning broadcast touches on a wide range of automotive topics, discussing industry trends, motorsports and the issues that are important to everyday drivers. Brian also uses the program as a way to promote racing and car enthusiast events in Chicagoland as well as stay in touch with

members of the community that have helped to keep the local scene so vibrant and alive.

In addition to his work on the airwaves, Paul Brian has also played an important role in organizing and expanding the same Chicago Auto Show that he attended as a young man. He was given the opportunity to officially join the Auto Show team after Alfa Romeo withdrew from the North American market and folded their racing operations. It was an offer he couldn't refuse, and he describes his 17 years as the Director of Communications and spokesman for the show – and its parent organization, the Chicago Automobile Trade Association – as the equivalent of "playing in an adult-sized toy box." Brian feels quite fortunate that he is able to indulge his love for automobiles in such a hands-on, official capacity, and he also is a strong advocate for the qualities and innovations that he feels have helped set the Chicago Auto Show apart from some of the other major automotive events both in America and abroad.

"The ability for the average car buyer or driving enthusiast to actually interact with the vehicles on display at the Chicago show is unmatched," he says, pointing to the success of programs like Chrysler's indoor test track that has, since its inception in 2005, seen 80,000 participants test drive brand-new vehicles sold by the automaker. Brian is of the opinion that the hands-on nature of the Chicago show gives it a different character than more industry-focused events, and that the sheer size and quality of the venue it is held at (McCormick Place) gives the organizers the freedom to explore new concepts for visitor interaction and vehicle presentation.

Paul's own personal daily driver and vehicular love interest is Helga, a 1996 Porsche 911 that he has kept mostly stock with the exception of upgraded and widened 18-inch wheels and a better stereo system. Brian explains that Helga is the most fun

car that he has ever owned, and that she satisfies a long-standing desire to own a 911 – a car he has always admired as staying true to evolving from its original 1965 design. Although Helga is about to go into hibernation mode for the winter, safely tucked away in the garage at his office, Brian knows that when he's having a rough day he can always head over to give the 911 a wash and wax, a ritual that never ceases to put his mind at ease. The Porsche's sleek lines are as much a delight for his hands and sponge as they are for his eyes.

After several decades invested in the Chicago scene Brian knows better than anyone that the automotive world is full of surprises, opportunities and history. What better example of how the community can turn full circle than to return to that celebrated Ferrari 250 LM that launched Paul in the direction that has taken him to where he is today.

"I was at an event 20 years after I first attended that race at Elkhart Lake," he recalls, "and I was acting as MC to a room full of people that also included that exact car – not just any Ferrari LM, but that same vehicle that had won back at Road America in 1964. Augie Pabst was also in attendance that night, and I was given the opportunity to meet him. While shaking his hand, I was overcome by emotion." The knowledge that so many years later, Brian was once again face to face with the very roots of his auto-



motive passion was a firm reminder of just how lucky he had been as a young man to find the inspiration that would fuel his dreams for the rest of his adult life.



"The Golden Greek" Chris Karanastere and Paul Brian

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