

'Wild Thang' Takes Top Color Honors at Autorama



TOM VALIQUETTE, of Idaho Falls, Idaho brought his Candy Raspberry Red over Cosmic Silver Dust-painted 1940 Mercury, powered by a GM LS-7 engine, to Autorama. — Photo: Irena Granaas

By Irena Granaas
Staff Reporter

Visitors to the 2007 Autorama main floor showroom at Cobo Center couldn't miss the gleaming red beauty near the Macomb entrance.

Dubbed "Wild Thang," it was just the rusted hulk of a 1940 Mercury when Tom Valiquette of Idaho Falls, Idaho began working on it over six years ago. Today, "Wild Thang" is a stunner in Candy Raspberry Red over Cosmic Silver Dust, giving the car the characteristic translucent luster of a candy paint job.

In fact, "Outstanding Use of Color" was one of the awards the car collected at AutoRama. It was also a Grade 8 finalist for the prestigious Ridler Award, although that honor was snagged by another splendid car, Tom Trepanier's "First Love," a masterpiece built from a 1936 three-window Ford Coupe.

Valiquette was clearly thrilled to be participating in

Detroit's annual national love-fest for cool cars and hot rods.

"I'm kind of overwhelmed," he commented. "I'm from a little town, Idaho Falls, Idaho, and I'd consider this to be the biggest show on Earth."

Valiquette recalled when he got the car, it had sat in a chicken coop for 30 years and was in pretty rough shape. But he noted he's the type who loves to bring these old cars back to life.

Starting with a drawing, Valiquette chose the Golden Eagle for the car's theme. Stylized, airbrushed eagles span both sides of the vehicle. The hood, salvaged and customized from a 1941 Lincoln Zephyr, can be clearly seen to have a pointed eagle "beak" in its center; to match, the car's front end which was "pinched" to give the car the look of an eagle coming at you head-on.

The original Mercury body was nearly six feet high, and has been lowered to about 50 inches. Front fenders were rebuilt to give the car a more

modern look, and the front bumper came from a 1962 Buick Riviera, the headlights are from a Subaru WRX, and it sports custom-made rear taillights.

In rebuilding and customizing the rusted frame, Valiquette used four 30-lb. rolls of wire. Under the hood, Wild Thang is powered by a 600 hp Z06LS-7 427 cubic inch Corvette engine and a drivetrain from a modern Corvette. To boost the stock engine's 505 hp, Valiquette and crew installed a new cam, reworked the throttle body, computer and heads to ramp it up to 600 horses.

Valiquette credited crew members Mike O'Brien, Roger Carlson and Curt Shiffman, without whose help Valiquette said he wouldn't be at AutoRama this year. He was also grateful to the Michigan Hot Rod Association, who helped him out a jam as the car was being driven to the showroom.

"I hit a bump in the road and the suspension collapsed because the air bags were too tight," Valiquette said. "The MHRA helped us with facilities,

tools and everything we needed to put it back together. I'd like to commend them for catering to us when we were in need of help."

In an earlier interview, Tom's uncle and godfather, Ron Valiquette, of Las Vegas, emphasized how proud he is of Tom and his skill in customizing autos. Ron, the original owner of the car, has been into hot rods for years, and has built a few himself.

During the interview, several judges came up and handed Ron the envelope which announced Wild Thang's selection as a Grade 8 finalist. Ron was so thrilled on his nephew's behalf he broke into tears and had to compose himself before continuing.

He praised Tom Valiquette's "surgeon like" skill in metalworking and overall workmanship.

"I think it takes a real talented artist to be able to design it and perfect the design," Ron said. "When you start with an old girl like this and make her young again ... I'm so proud it's my godson doing it."

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TECH CENTER NEWS
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Dear Ron,
the article
is in the
8c section.
page 6

Enjoy!
-Irena

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