GREAT VEHICLES NEVER DIE, THEY JUST KEEP GETTING FIXED. SAY HELLO TO THE MECHANICS WHO SHOW LOVE TO CARS THAT MANUFACTURERS HAVE LONG ABANDONED.

by Ezra Dyer • photographs by Mathieu Young • illustration by Tim Boelaars

I COULD TELL YOU THE LOCATION OF RANDY EMA'S DUESENBERG GARAGE, BUT then I'd have to . . . well, actually, I couldn't even really tell you where it is. I'm standing right outside, and I need to call Ema to verify I'm in the right place because there's no sign indicating that this nondescript Los Angeles industrial building houses the world's premier Duesenberg restoration shop. When you're working on cars that sell for millions of dollars, discretion is the order of the day.

Ema belongs to a rare sect of mechanical specialists whose passion is devoted to a single esoteric vehicle. Most mechanics are generalists, but a handful of gearheads catch a fever for a particular machine out on the fringe and cultivate their expertise and resources until they become The Guy for that car. Temples of automotive obsession exist all over the country, populated by diehards who stoke the fire for Lancias or Studebakers or Mercedes-Benz Pullman limos. Ema's shop is my embarkation point for a 1200-mile pilgrimage up the West Coast to meet some of these characters and learn exactly how one becomes a nationally recognized authority on Duesenbergs, or the DeLorean DMC-12, or a GMC motorhome produced for five years in the 1970s. Because that last one in particular seems like a career path your high school guidance counselor most certainly would have recommended against.

If you're going to visit artisans of quirky and anachronistic auto engineering, you need an appropriately contrarian vehicle, so I borrowed a 2011 Mazda RX-8 for the trip. Mazda will halt production of the RX-8 after this model year, making it the last car to use a rotary engine. So if you own one of these Mazdas in 2032, you'll need to know someone who speaks the language of rotors and ports instead of pistons and valves. You'll need The Guy. But before

Toby Peterson, owner of DeLorean Northwest, has a background in aviation engineering but has switched careers to work exclusively on the repair and maintenance of the iconic '80s sports car.


DMC
POLO SPORT

you can enlist the help of one of these automotive shamans, you'll need to find him.

THE DUESY DOCTOR

Stepping through Ema's door is like entering Santa's workshop—if Santa had a serious thing for high-end antique cars. In one room, a drafting table holds a blueprint for some extinct part that's about to be reconstituted by Ema's craftsmen. In an adjacent room, a Bugatti motor sits on the floor next to a display case filled with old toy cars. Once you get past the museum-quality distractions out front—hey, is that a set of Duesenberg headers just hanging on the wall?—you're into the real action: the garage. Ema takes a photo of each car he's restored, and a far corner of the garage is wallpapered with snapshots of projects past.

Duesenbergs belong to a rarified league of automobiles. Founded in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1913 by brothers Friedrich and August Duesenberg, the company that bore their name created hand-built luxury performance cars on and off for 24 years. If you're lucky enough to own a Duesenberg (fewer than 1200 were made), Ema is the last word.

"I'm a historian," Ema says as we make our way toward the back of the shop. "History is a passion for me and has been since I was a little kid. I like an original piece because it's only original once."

Ema's never felt an urge to put his own riff on what the factories wrought, but one corner of his garage houses a personal project that allows some leeway for creative interpretation. "This is my hot rod," Ema says. "It's a '22 Duesenberg, but prior to 1934 someone cut the chassis and put a '28 Chrysler body on it." Today, fusing a Duesenberg and a Chrysler would constitute aesthetic and financial madness, but the chronological distance of that strange decision gives the car its own interesting story. And for Ema, that connects it spiritually to other Duesenbergs—each car was a reflection of its owner. Each car has a story.

"Nothing has come up to the standards of a Duesenberg," Ema says. "No two cars are the same. You have this wonderful high-performance chassis and the body of your choice. Even today, they're fast." Supercharged Duesenberg Model Js could hit 129 mph, making them the Bugatti Veyrons of their era and a high-water mark for the American car industry.

There are 378 Model Js still in existence and Ema has laid eyes on all but three. There's one Model A he hasn't seen and it's in Australia. Ema maintains a stash of original drawings, patterns, and blueprints, which he uses to create more than 1000 different parts to keep the world's Duesenbergs on the road. For all practical purposes, Randy Ema is Duesenberg, circa 2012.

While Ema's workshop could keep me entertained all day, I've got an appointment with another enthusiast almost 7 hours distant in San Francisco. The object of Jim Kanomata's expertise is certainly less exotic than a Duesy, but his affection for a very specific machine—the 1973 to 1978 GMC recreational vehicle—makes him a kindred spirit.

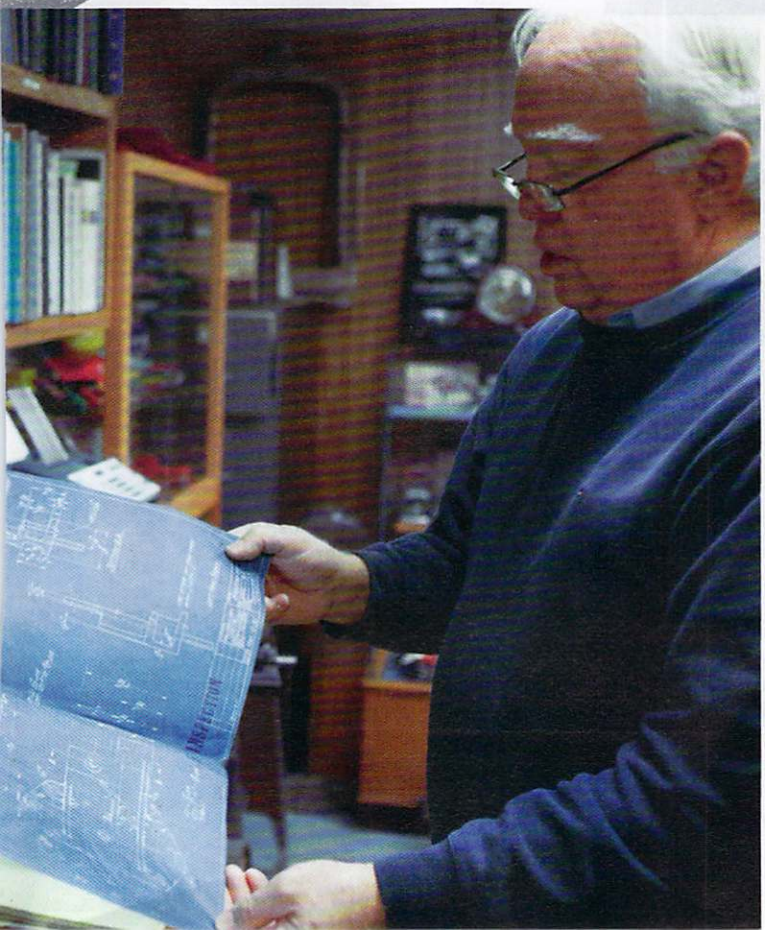
SHOP: *RANDY EMA, INC.* **LOCATION:** *ORANGE, CALIF.*
OBSESSION: *DUESENBERGS*

The Duesenberg Automobile & Motors Company produced some of the most luxurious cars of the early 20th century but couldn't survive the Great Depression. Randy Ema owns 28,000 of the company's original drawings, so he can produce brand-new parts for cars that are more than 75 years old.

The garage of Randy Ema (right) is like a museum filled with artifacts from a golden age of American autos—but it isn't without its oddities. On jacks (above) is a mongrel Duesenberg that someone saw fit to mate to a Chrysler body long ago.

SHOP: *APPLIED GMC* **LOCATION:** *NEWARK, CALIF.*
OBSESSION: *GMC MOTORHOMES*

When it comes to GMC RVs, Jim Kanomata is a fixer and a fan. He has owned three of the lumbering 1970s icons and restored or rebuilt hundreds. Mechanically, he's the opposite of a purist. "I don't get righteous when people want to do something nonstock," he says.



So I bid farewell, fire up the RX-8, and merge onto I-5 north accompanied by the hard-edged, 9000-rpm song of America's last rotary.

THE MOTOR COACHMAN

My drive to San Francisco, confined to the highway, doesn't afford much opportunity to explore the talents of the Mazda's chassis. The rotary's compact size and light weight allow for sublimely lithe and balanced handling. So when I miss the final turn for Kanomata's garage, I switch off the stability control and indulge in a wide, arcing drift in the empty parking lot of the adjacent business, which happens to be the now-defunct Solyndra solar campus. Solyndra may have bet the wrong way on solar panels, but its empty parking lot is excellent for doughnuts.

When I finally find the headquarters for Kanomata's business, Applied GMC, I discover rows of RVs crowding the back of the building. Some are customer vehicles awaiting repair, others are sacrificial parts donors. A spare-tire cover reads, "I've been bitten by the GMC motorhome bug." A faded license plate bears the tag SNLBLZR, a reference to the leisurely acceleration provided by the stock Oldsmobile powertrain.

Even in the world of recreational vehicles, the GMC motorhome is a seriously odd duck. It lacks the shiny nostalgio-futurism of classic Airstream trailers and never achieved the name-brand cachet of RVs from Winnebago. The GMC motorhome

SHOP: *DELOREAN NORTHWEST* **LOCATION:** *BELLEVUE, WASH.*
OBSESSION: *DELOREAN DMC-12*

Surprisingly, shop owner Toby Peterson is not as sick of *Back to the Future* jokes as you might think. He's even been known to work on flux capacitors.

will forever be a child of the 1970s, with an anachronistic style and mechanical logic all its own.

Kanomata was bitten by the GMC bug in 1980, when he bought his first motor coach. Over the next 15 years, he figures he covered 600,000 miles. "I had to sell it because it had so many miles," Kanomata says. His second RV reached 400,000 miles before the motor—a nonstock 540-cubic-inch twin-turbo intercooled Cadillac V-8—asked for a vacation of its own. With all that wheel time, you'd think that the GMC motor coach would hold no more surprises for Jim Kanomata. But when you're dealing with a machine that combines the attributes of an Oldsmobile Toronado with those of a small house, the intrigue never dies. "You think that when you've put a million miles on it, you've figured out all the things that can go wrong. Well, you always find something," he says.

Kanomata's ascension to GMC authority was not exactly preordained. "It wasn't my intent," he says. "I wasn't happy with the performance mine was giving me. I started tinkering with the gears and then started selling them. Pretty soon I got a reputation as the guy who took care of problems."

Kanomata estimates that there are 5000 to 8000 GMCs still on the road, enough to keep him busy without working on vehicles that he deems SOBs—Some Other Brand. SOBs, in Kanomata's estimation, are trucks with boxes bolted to the back. The GMC's appeal is rooted in the fact that it was built to its mission from the ground up, bucking RV convention in favor of front-wheel drive and tandem rear axles. Not that GM didn't leave some room for improvement.

"We believe in anything that'll make it operate a little bit better, like fuel injection or disc brakes," says Kanomata, whose background is in aerodynamic engineering. Kanomata relishes pushing the limits of RV performance, whether via a 600-horse Caddy V-8 or heavy-duty stabilizer bars. He was once pulled over in his motorhome for going 93 mph, and that was before he added the turbochargers. "My wife doesn't put china in the cabinets anymore," he says.

THE MAN OF STAINLESS STEEL

My next destination, DeLorean Motor Company Northwest, lies about 800 miles north of San Francisco, which gives me plenty of time to contemplate the RX-8. The car is a magnet for rotary fanatics. While gassing up in Dunsmuir, Calif., a guy on the opposite side of the pumps tells me that he once owned a 1984 RX-7. When I ask if he ever had to work on it, he replies, "No, that's why I loved it!" before adding the rather Zen pronouncement "It wasn't fast, but it was quick."

I think I know what he means. The RX-8 is a back-road scalpel rather than a drag-racing blunt instrument. It's the kind of car that encourages you to get off the highway and find a string of corners where you can drop down a gear and pitch that rear-wheel-drive chassis toward an apex or two. And that's what I do in northern Oregon, catching the attention of a freight-train conductor traversing a raised trestle above the road. He waves and I wave back with my right hand, which is off the wheel because I'm busy shifting. In the RX-8, you're always busy shifting.

The knock on the Wankel engine is that its novelty doesn't justify its drawbacks—mainly, its prodigious thirst for fuel (on the highway, I average a trucklike 19.3 mpg). The rotary was born from technical innovation, but at this point it's more a signifier of free thinking. Sort of like gullwing doors or stainless-steel body panels.

DeLorean Northwest, just outside Seattle, isn't evident from the street—I'm detecting a theme here—but when I find it, I'm struck that this could be what a working DeLorean dealership might have looked like before the original company went under in 1982. A garage packed with cars awaiting service is flanked by a showroom where a pair of DMC-12s (the only model the company ever produced) beckons potential buyers. Even the official DMC sign outside is from an original dealership. Fans of a certain movie franchise might be tempted to ask: When are we?

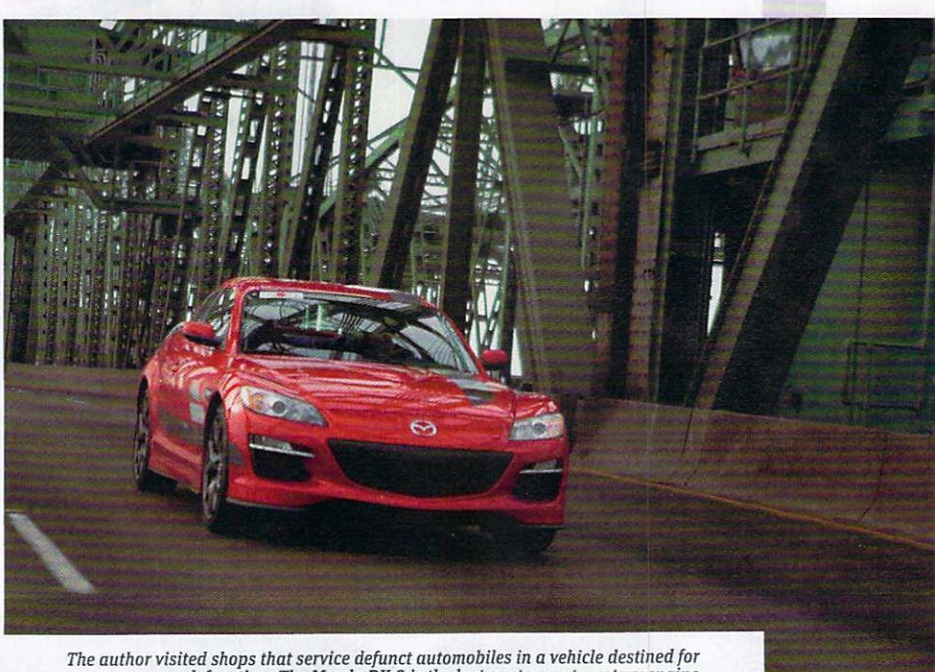
Toby Peterson didn't have a grand plan to build a business around his favorite vehicle. But once he bought a DeLorean, the car steadily began to play a larger role in his life. "My wife and I were looking for a sports car in the late '80s," he says. "We found a DeLorean that was a basket case. Well, I'm one of those guys who goes to the pound and wants to save all the dogs, so of course I bought it."

At Boeing, Peterson was a principal structural engineer on the 747. Which put him in a good position to investigate the failure points of his new four-wheeled acquisition. When a trailing-arm bolt sheared, he put it under an electron microscope for a fatigue analysis. It turned out the bolts had a flaw, a type of corrosion pitting that would eventually lead to disaster. "I'm able to get the best fasteners that man can produce, so I began making improved trailing-arm bolts in 1999," Peterson says. He began solving not just his own DeLorean problems, but everyone else's too. In 2006 Peterson traded wings for gullwings, retiring from Boeing to open DeLorean Northwest.

John Z. DeLorean himself would applaud the chutzpah of a business built around a defunct company that never made many cars in the first place—about 9300 DMC-12s left the factory. But those cars have a high survival rate, thanks to their stainless-steel bodies and the publicity generated by the *Back to the Future* movie trilogy. When Peterson held his grand opening, 25 cars showed up. Ten stayed behind for work.

And once you've got your DeLorean running, you'll probably be tempted to enhance its performance. "The Peugeot-Renault V-6 is like the small-block Chevy of Europe," Peterson says. "There are lots of performance parts available for it." One customer car is awaiting a supercharger, and when we step outside to fire it up, we find a mechanic from a shop next door eyeing the RX-8. It turns out that he's a former Mazda salesman who sold the first RX-8 in North America. "A guy came in six months before the car was available and put down a $10,000 deposit," he says. Mazda says it's committed to continuing development of the rotary engine, but it's possible that the 2011 RX-8 is the Wankel's last chance to power a new car. As the years go by, mechanics devoted to the rotary will become a rare breed.

"I know a guy who races an old RX-7," the mechanic says. "Because the rotary is so compact, he rebuilds it on his kitchen table." Mazda's rotary might be far more prolific than the DeLorean DMC-12, the GMC motorhome, or the Duesenberg Model J, but it's similar in kind, an esoteric offshoot of automotive history that attracts a passionate following. That's a brand of devotion that Peterson, Kanomata, and Ema would probably understand. "I bought the car to save it," Peterson says. "And it ended up taking over my life." **PM**



The author visited shops that service defunct automobiles in a vehicle destined for defunction. The Mazda RX-8 is the last car to sport a rotary engine.

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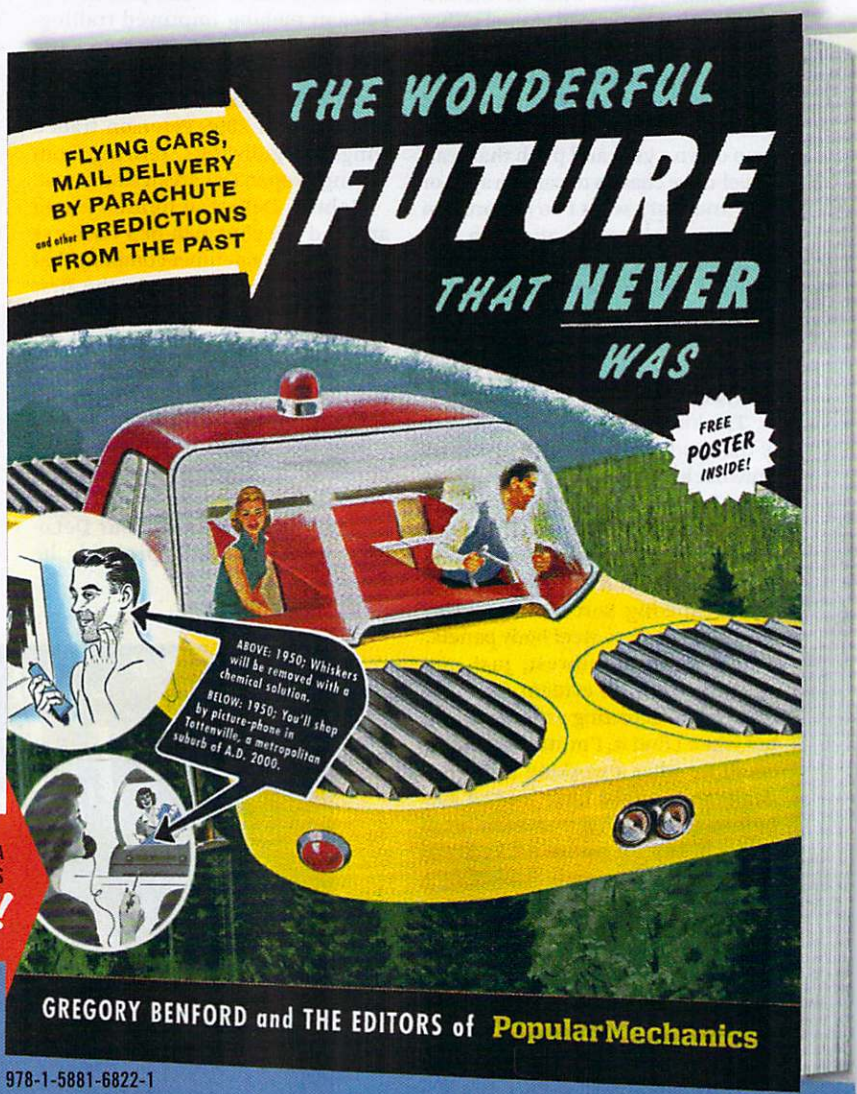

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