Hall of Famers: the 1955 Porsche 550 Spyder (front), immortalized by James Dean; the 1934 Alfa Romeo 8C-2300 (back); the 1955 Mercedes 300SL Gullwing (opposite).
SPEED

With Ralph Lauren riding shotgun, restoration master Paul Russell puts history's finest automobiles back on the road.
PAUL RUSSELL, the soft-spoken master of classic-car restoration, ignored a showroom full of sparkling coupes and vintage duetos annexed to his headquarters in Essex, Massachusetts, and headed straight to a rusted hulk in the corner: a 1932 Alfa Romeo with a cloth top foiled with rainwater and neglect.

“This is like the car in the museum,” he said, calmly, despite the utter improbability of the assertion. The show car he was alluding to—a 1958 Alfa Romeo 8C-2900 Mille Miglia—had spent the past spring gleaming under the bright lights of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in the show “Speed, Style, and Beauty: Cars from the Ralph Lauren Collection.” The car in front of him, however, was a mess. The interior was filled with loose parts secured by twine or stuffed in Rubbermaid boxes; the front fenders, scoured down to the sheet metal, were scrawled with the sort of Magic Marker lines that a plastic surgeon draws on bare flesh before taking up the knife.

But Russell, a silver-haired Yankee with an unmistakable perfectionist streak, could back up the claim. His shop, Paul Russell and Company, finishes somewhere between two to six total restorations a year, returning rust buckets to their original condition, at times even subtly improving them, adding the sort of individual options—fitted luggage and hand-stitched upholstery; period hardware painstakingly researched for authenticity—that the original owners may not have had the money or inclination for. “People say, ‘Well, it couldn’t have been this beautiful when it left the factory,’ so perfect and fresh that it’s a little unreal,” Russell told me. “But after it’s aged awhile it just looks like you started with a new car and took good care of it.” The claim is plausible—if your idea of a new car is a 1938 Bugatti Atlantic or a 1955 Gullwing Mercedes, completely restored according to your specifications, at an average cost, Russell says, of between $300,000 and $600,000 (which does not include whatever you paid to acquire the rusted original at auction or on eBay).

Russell leaned into the old Alfa Romeo with a mixture of familiarity and respect, the way a classics professor picks up his Thucydides. He pointed out the wood supports in the door frame. The earliest European carmakers were primarily engine and chassis makers, he said, and they relied on traditional carriage builders to provide the body of the car. Back in that era, Paris was the coach-building capital of the world, and luxury cars, like the members of the wealthy and titled classes who bought them, didn’t shy from bold fashion statements. The best coach builders set the styles, and the car buyers of the 20s and 30s flocked to the annual Concours d’Elegance to see the whimsy and hauteur of their latest cabriolets and coupes. “People experimented with new styling,” Russell said. “Some people would buy their Rolls-Royce with a summer body and a winter body”—changing the shell of their car as easily as they’d swap tennis sweaters for raccoon coats. He pointed to the Magic Marker on the fenders. The line traced the alterations of an earlier owner who had gone back to his coach builder to have the fenders enlarged when, sometime in the mid-’30s, fender fashions changed.

It should come as no surprise that many of the most stylish vehicles that Russell has revived belong to the fashion icon Ralph Lauren. Russell’s first business was called Gullwing Service Company, because it concentrated on restoring and servicing Mercedes-Benz cars from the ’50s, when the manufacturer’s signature model was the 300SL Gullwing Coupe, whose scalloped doors opened upward, giving the impression of a gull in flight. In 1983 Lauren handed a 1955 Gullwing over to Russell and was pleased with both the final product and the lengthy collaboration that led to it; the two men share a capacity to obsess about both the details and the overall design. In fact, Lauren was so pleased that when he bought one of the rarest and most highly prized cars in the world—the 1938 Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic Coupe, a brooding masterpiece of Art Moderne design—he entrusted it to Russell, whose 1990 restoration then won best in show at the Pebble Beach Concours d’Elegance, the most prestigious prize in the vintage-car world. The prize launched Russell’s second life, as the master restorer of a variety of automobiles, most notably prewar coach-built classics.

The seaside streets around Russell’s 30,000-square-foot shop are filled with antiques stores and clam shops. On working days it’s worth it to take your order of clams outside to watch the show: the Russell employees log more than 150 miles test-driving each of their re-creations, and it’s not unusual to see a 1950 Ferrari 156 Berlinetta or a Porsche 356A Spyder, better known as the James Dean car, whipping by, favoring the gentle hills with the bygone roar of an antique engine in perfect running order. This sensation, the almost jarringly familiar feeling you get when you cross paths with celebrity, is multiplied when you step inside the shop.

In the body shop, eerily recognizable silver body parts—the skeleton of a Ferrari, the tailpiece of an old Bugatti race car—balance on workbenches or hang from the ceiling. By the big open bays of the paint room, the recognizable shape of a ’30s Mercedes (isn’t there a picture of Neville Chamberlain riding in one of those?) sits drying under netting. Russell moves from room to room, conferring with the artisans about crucial decisions. He directs the efforts and supervises the extensive detective work behind each restoration, poring over archival photographs to ascertain, for example, whether the bodywork was finished with Phillips or flathead screws. “I’ve sat in steamy apartments in Milan, looking through 1,400 negatives,” he told me, which is as close as he comes to boasting. It’s hard to imagine a greater
Russell with a 1967 Porsche 356A Sunroof Coupe that's better than new thanks to him.
I watched the speedometer wavering for a while around 100 before he hit the brakes. I could feel hair whipping around my head, and I am almost bald.