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NATASHA HENSTRIDGE

FROM SCI-FI TO *ELI*

HEAVY

METAL

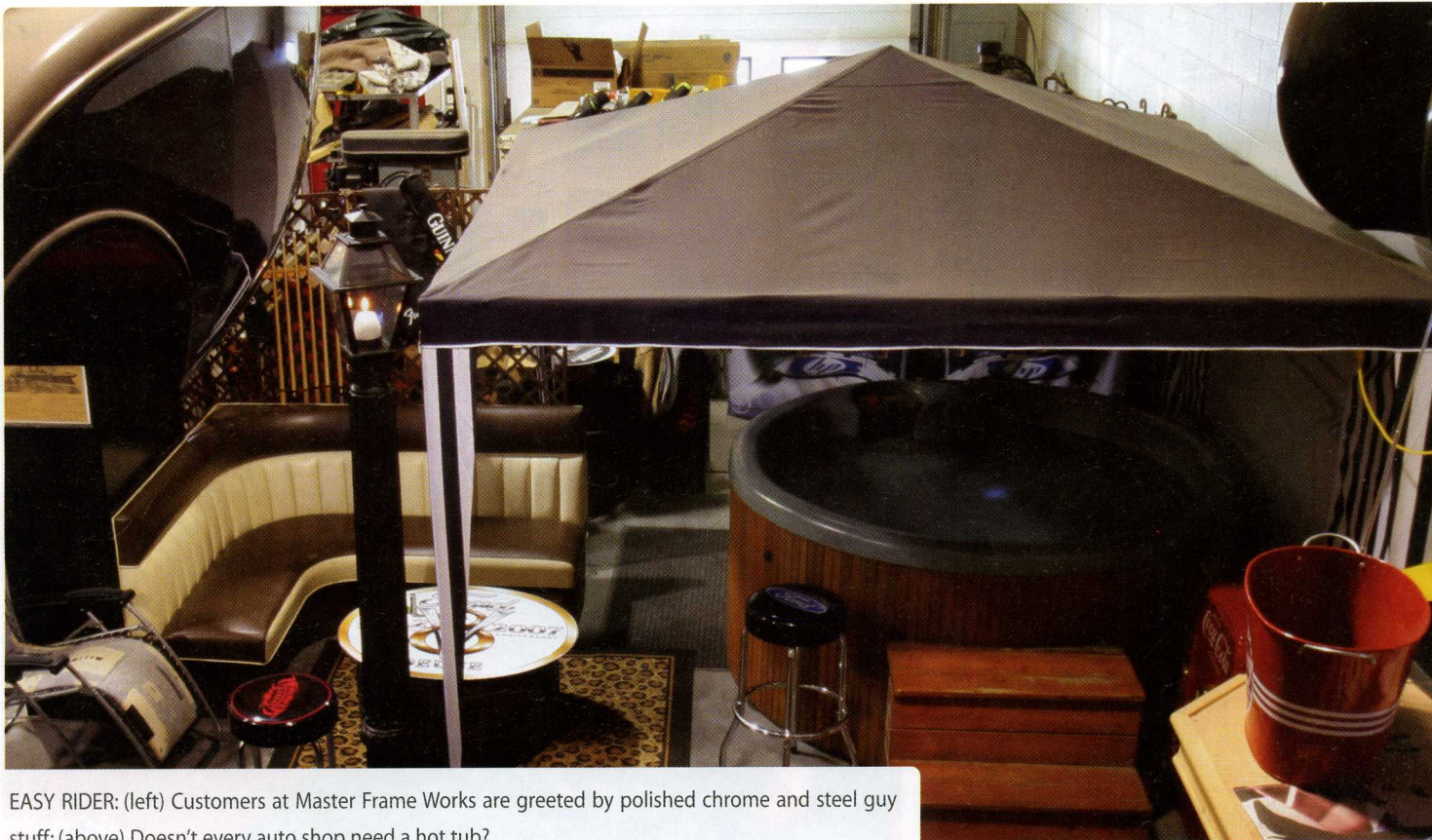
Written by
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JAMES WOODWARD

One Calgary entrepreneur's auto body shop also houses an eye-popping collection of retro kitsch

For a guy who spends his days bending vehicle frames, Wilfred Wietzke's workspace shows a lot of creative flair. Instead of grease-stained calendars from tool companies, Wietzke's south Calgary shop, Master Frame Works Ltd., showcases an astonishing collection of pop culture artifacts with a distinctly male focus on cars, beverages and, well, cars. But despite the volume of carefully displayed stuff, this is no museum — the space is vibrant and alive.

Just inside the door, clients are greeted by sparkling black and white checkered floors and walls covered with vintage signs and memorabilia. The initial effect is overwhelming — you just about need to plop down in his antique barber chair to

take it all in. But the shop's front is only the first hint of what's waiting back in the workspace. Through an old gas station door — complete with a pop advertisement on the push bar — lurks his collection...so far. Trying to comprehend everything in Wietzke's 2,200 sq. ft. shop can push the first-time visitor to the point of dizziness.



EASY RIDER: (left) Customers at Master Frame Works are greeted by polished chrome and steel guy stuff; (above) Doesn't every auto shop need a hot tub?

For example, a bright orange crank air pump is mounted on the wall next to a black, full-size gas pump, which is being converted into a fish tank.

As well as doing business on his shop floor, the curator often entertains there — perhaps because it boasts a billiards corner with cold beverages in a vintage pop cooler, wedged between the hot tub and sauna. Yep, hot tub and sauna. There's also a candy-apple red stacked washer and dryer — to take care of those hot tub towels — next to a bathroom featuring his hand-built circular shower.

Hoisted above the pool table, Wietzke's showcase piece is a custom-crafted fibreglass replica body of a 1932 three-window Ford coupe. His true passion and future dream project, the car's remaining parts hang around the shop as art, including a tire doubling as a cocktail table base. And

beside one of his all time favourite finds — a rare clock salvaged from a Russian submarine — sits a genuine (though restored) English phone booth which, he says, "is fully functional like a lot of the things in my shop need to be." He also says, "The entire shop is heated using a 'green' furnace burning used motor oil cleanly. It's not cheap to run but I think it's important to be responsible with the waste products of my industry."

If all that isn't enough, there's also a '50s soda shop-style mezzanine complete with a vintage Indian motorcycle still caked with mud from the bottom of a Florida river hanging from the ceiling. Even the top-floor office is luxurious, with plush Vegas-like red carpet and a ladder to a "siesta loft" for those slow days. Every horizontal space is plastered with art, posters and vintage photos, plus a corner reserved for family snap-

shots of his parent's wedding, siblings and even a young Wietzke in a sailor suit. Add to that karate medals from his champion black-belt days, and a bear rug spread at the foot of his grand desk — compliments of his brother, who presented it to their parents as a 25th anniversary gift back in 1975.

His desk is cluttered with still more treasures, including a WWII Swivodex inkwell he admits to using only once — he penned a letter to a girl. This confirmed bachelor can even grab a clean shirt after a hard day's work from a hanging closet bar. Completing the collection is a shrine-like glass cabinet housing his only movie memorabilia: items from hero Arnold Schwarzenegger's classic *Terminator* series. A second barber chair holds down one corner of the mezzanine, and in the other: a one-of-a-kind electric guitar with a vintage oil can body. He



GUY STYLE: (left to right) Wietzke relaxes in a barber chair with his unique guitar; An aerial view of the shop floor.

picked that one up on a trip with his singer/songwriter daughter Jasmine Wietzke. By the way, father and daughter are inked with matching “family crest” tattoos.

So where does this near-fanatical passion stem from? The down-to-earth, kid-in-a-candy-store Wietzke is not sure. He grew up in rural Ontario, as a middle child with three sisters and three brothers on a mink ranch, located — fatefully — next to an auto wrecker. He took his first job there at 14 and has never looked back.

At age 20, he visited Alberta, fell in love with the prairies, and has lived here almost 30 years. Of course, back then he had to tow out one of his first cars — a ’69 Chevy Nova — for eventual restoration, but he still regrets leaving behind his sweetest teen ride: a ’67 Ford Falcon sports coupe. Of course, his considerations were practical. “I smashed [it] up one foolish night in teen-angst over a first love gone bad...busted that car in half so bad it took two tow trucks to haul it away,” he jokingly admits.

He now channels the reckless eagerness of his youth into a passion for the unique, from his talent of shaping metal to an impressive assemblage of mid-century pop culture objets d’art. He lives what he knows, with a motto of “Work hard, play hard,” which a few lucky Albertans get a glimpse of when he opens up his shop for one of his not-to-be-missed customer appreciation events. For Wilfred Wietzke, both life and bending frames are about metal, strength, power and the art behind it all. •