General Project 37—Model Car Customizer/Alvis Barrington

Alvis Barrington recently submitted some photos of model cars, which he customizes using Sherline machines. Following is the interview we had with him in December 2017.

Sherline: How long have you been building car models?

Alvis Barrington: Ever since I was six years old, and I'm 66. My brother, who's 80, told me it's gonna get old, and I told him when it does I'll let him know.

SH: Do you have a particular era that you like to focus on for your car models, 40s, 50s, 60s?

AB: 50s and 60s, and I like pickups and muscle cars.

SH: When you're working, do you work in a particular scale?

AB: Yeah, 1/24th, 1/25th, and occasionally 1/16th. Mostly 1/24th, 1/25th. And I've got probably close to 1,500 unbuilt models that are mint, back from the 60s I collect as well. When it goes into my room it's a black hole and it don't come out.

And just for a note, my wife is a car nut and she has a '69 Impala convertible, her real car, that she bought in high school. And then I have a '49 Chevy convertible that I've had for 35 years.

SH: How do you decide which make and model to build?

AB: I've got so many of them, it's kind of hard, but mostly I like to build pickup trucks and then customize them. But it's just whatever mood I'm in and just go with it.

SH: What type of equipment are you using to build these body parts or the engine blocks

AB: I use basically the body off the kit, and maybe the engine block and transmission, and then everything else is pretty much scratch built.

SH: When you say pretty much everything else is scratch built, what do you mean?

AB: Scratch built...I mean the chassis, and the suspension components, and then I machine my wheels, and I'll pick up the tires from different kits and do whatever I want to do with that, you know, to make big and littles ones.

SH: So to reiterate, you're machining or scratch building the chassis, the wheels, suspensions...

AB: Right. The chassis components, the rack and pinion steering, the independent suspension, and rear ends.

SH: I think when you spoke with me last time, you said you're retired now?

AB: Yep.

SH: What did you do before retirement?

AB: Oh goodness, I worked in the movie industry for about 10 years as a prop maker and a model maker. I did the maze on The Maze Runner. That was pretty cool (he's listed on IMDB). And then before that I had several jobs: I worked for General Electric as a telephone technician for NASA, so I've had quite a bit of experience throughout my life in different jobs. And the car industry, in part, and basically that's it.

SH: When, or how did you learn to machine?

AB: A friend of mine was an auto mechanic, and he was a machinist at one of the dealerships. And we started talking and he said come over and try my lathe and mill machine out, which was a small one. And I set in there from like 7:00 in the afternoon till about 2:00 in the morning. He knocks on the door and says, "Are you going to be leaving anytime soon?" It was just that he knew a lot and I didn't know anything. I just started out with the lathe and then he put me on the Sherline equipment, and then he said get this attachment, get this attachment, get this attachment, and I had not a clue on how to use them, but over the years of just trial and error and just making it happen I'm getting better at it now because I have more time to spend with it.

SH: Let's go over some of the photos you sent. I'm looking at image 2077 (Figure 1), the engine block...Can you tell me what you machined on that?

AB: Everything that's shiny on it: the blower, the intake, the valve covers, all the pulleys. That blower was a piece of work. It came out really nice, it wasn't as hard as I thought it was going to be.

FIGURE 1

SH: How about image 2085 (Figure 2)? You're showing the engine block on the chassis.

AB: What it's showing is the chassis, that brown khaki-looking color, is all scratch built from plastic, and then the motor and block is plastic. And then everything else, the mufflers, the tail pipes, the upper and lower control arms, and all that are machined with the blower sitting in there showing the wires and the distributor.

And then on the other picture, it's just the mock up. That's the color of the actual almond looking color of the wheel where I machined the wheel and the baby moon of the poverty hubcaps that go on it.

FIGURE 2

SH: Then on picture 2087 (Figure 3), the rear-end tailgate.

AB: Right. That's the tailgate where I machined the bumper bar, and then I machined the tail lights and put in the plastic inserts (lenses), and sanded them down to machined bezel, which have back-up lights, as well in it.

FIGURE 3

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SH: OK. Then you have a number of other pictures here with the hood open showing the engine in place (Figure 4).

AB: That shows a better view of the upper and lower control arms, and it also shows the dash pod and everything where it's sitting in the center of the engine.

And the next picture is showing the rear of the cab that shows the instrument cluster with all the machined-up instrument gauges.

FIGURE 4

SH: Then you have an image 2094 (Figure 5) showing the grill and headlamps. Were those machined?

AB: Yep. That's where it's got to look like the brass rod is holding up the hood. That's the little turn signal under the headlamp and the bars were machined as well.

FIGURE 5

SH: So in the instance of this Studebaker, you've taken a model kit and you've customized it.

AB: Actually, the Studebaker was a 20 year old piece that was made by SJS*, and what it is, it's a resin piece where somebody took a 50 Chevy pickup and modified it to look like a Studebaker, and they're almost an 1/8" thick on the body, and I had to thin everything down to a 1/16", or below just to get it to look right just to make it look like model car thickness.

* Now available from RMR Models in Pennsylvania, http://www.rmrmodels.com/.

SH: And how did you do that?

AB: I used a Dremel and a lot of sanding.

SH: Did say you have a 5400 mill?

AB: Yep. I have an XYZ base. I use it where I interchange the motor unit between the machines.

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SH: OK. And you have a lathe as well?

AB: Let me see what it is. I have a 4530 model [lathe], and then I have the rotary table, the radius cutter, the tilt base [angle table], the vise. It's all hand cranked, it's not CNC or anything like that. That's before I knew anything about that stuff. But I'm happy with what I've got. People say, "Man, I sure would love to have what you got." They freak out over it. I'm not a machinist, but one of the guys was telling me, "You could hold your own weight with a lot of guys that's out there, believe me."

SH: Would you mind sending me some photos of your workshop setup?

AB: I sent you one little picture (Figure 6). All it is basically, is a tabletop that I use and then I made a trough, a plywood trough, uh, not plywood but a board trough that catches all the shavings and everything and all like that. And it's really convenient. Before I used to work on a table and have like a drop cloth to catch everything, but I bought a table that holds my lathe and my mill machine, both units, and I can roll it around the room, and it really makes it nice. It's not a big work area; it's just a little work table.

FIGURE 6

SH: Would you like to add anything to what we've just discussed?

AB: Did you get one picture of the truck where it's laying on its side where it shows the under carriage?

SH: Yes, I have that (Figure 7).

AB: OK, if you'll look at the body you'll see where it's thick in some areas behind the front fender where it's thick but doesn't matter because you don't see it, but I had to thin everything out to make it all work, and it's got like an air bag suspension that I used O-rings for the air bag.

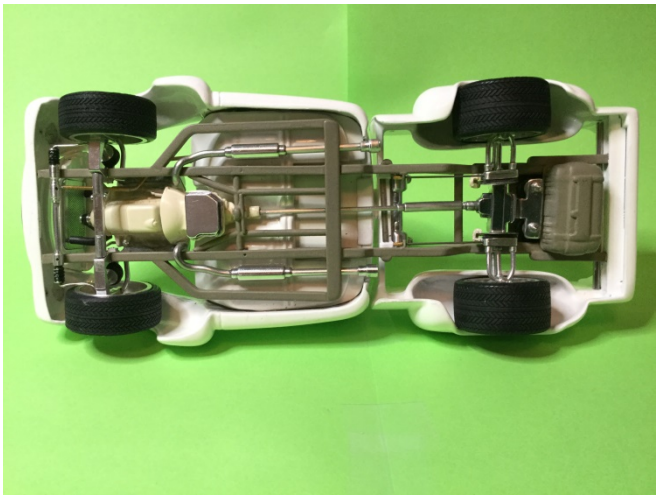

FIGURE 7

SH: That's nice work.

AB: And then the machined wheels on Robert Langoni's car (Figure 8), that's a friend of mine, I made the wheels for the truck but I didn't like the wheels—they didn't look right on the truck, so I gave him the wheels to put on his car and everybody at the show was freakin' out over those wheels. And I'm not a mathematician, and I'm not a rocket scientist either but I just learn by trial and error. It took me about two days to figure out how to make the wheel and after that I can make them in probably an hour.

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FIGURE 8

SH: Wow!

AB: It's just one of those things, you know, and I'm enjoying the machine so much. I'll send you a couple pictures here in a minute of the little work table that I use. Like I said I have a lot of the attachments, and I'd like to add that the rotary table, I couldn't live without it , and the mill vise, and also that radius cutter; that's what I used to cut the center plugs on my wheels.

SH: How often do you go to these model shows?

AB: I got one in November in Atlanta, and I've got one coming up in March in the Dallas area, and then that's about it. And last year I went to New Jersey and they had 1800 to 2000 built models, just like what I got. It was like, well let's put it this way, I took about $3,000.00 and I came back with change. It cost me a ton of money to ship everything back, but it's fun.

I'm known as the model car guy around here. Anybody that knows anything about model cars, they always call me, so my mouth runs more anything else so I can do you a lot of good justice with the Sherline. A lot of folks want them, but they just can't afford them, a lot of guys in the hobby.

You know what got me into start buying? Sometimes I had to wait six months to year to get my parts, if you could even get it, so I said, "You know what, I've had enough of this. I'm going to buy a machine and I'm going to deal with my own stuff, and learn how to do it." Now I can understand why when people see that I machine stuff, "Hey, can you make me a set of those, or this, or this, or that?" Sure, no problem. I'll put it on my list.

SH: How long have you had your Sherline machines?

AB: I've had mine [Sherline machines] I think roughly, I don't know how far back, at least 10 years or so. And I'm learning on it, but I tell you what, I have not had, knock on wood, have had to change anything or do anything to it. I just keep it in a good air conditioned room in my house, in my model room, and it's really been a good unit. I can't stop saying enough good things about the product and the service that y'all have.

SH: I appreciate your time today Alvis. You have a wonderful story and thank you very much.

AB: Thank you.

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