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*"These metal stripes are so cool, I wish I thought of 'em myself." —"TV" Lou Santiago*

ELECTRONICALLY REPRINTED FROM JANUARY 2008

**SPECIAL REPORT**  
HISTORY OF THE ZL1—WHY FRED GIBB BLEW HIS STACK!

# **INSIDE GM'S SECRET SKUNKWORKS!**

**PROJECT X UNDER THE KNIFE THEY'RE CHOPPING UP OUR '57 —WHY WE'RE NOT WORRIED!**



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PHR PROJECT CAR

PROJECT X

# COMING HOME

After 50 years of service, GM rebuilds Project X, the greatest hot rod of all time.



By William Harvey • Photography by Johnny Hunkins, Chuck Cloud, and GM

In 1965, Argus Publishing purchased an unassuming '57 Chevy Bel Air 210 post model to use as a project car for the editors of *Popular Hot Rodding* magazine. Through its existence, the '57 would serve as a test bed for multiple engine

combinations, suspension setups, and drivetrain enhancements. Through four decades of ownership, the editors of *PHR* used the car to teach several generations of hot rodders how to build cars, while an entire aftermarket industry grew up

around it. Above all, the bright yellow shoebox—named Project X—became a legend in the hot rod community, arguably the most significant car in the history of the hobby.

**“GM Performance Division is going to reinvent Pro Street.”**—Mike Copeland, GM Performance Division project manager

In the last update to Project X (“Born To Run,” April 2004), the car got the very first Ram Jet 502 crate engine and 4L80E transmission from GM Performance Parts. Here, “X” has just been delivered to GM’s top-secret Design Center in Warren, Michigan, and is being inspected by GM Performance Division Technicians Mario Orlando and Jim Gobart. Both men grew up reading about this car and were amazed to have it in front of them and that they would be part of the “rebirth” of a legend.





Captured in mid-August 2007, deep within the GM Design Center, Project X started its transformation. GMPD was most concerned about the points of the rollcage that went nowhere—just welded to the floor and not brought through to the frame. Members of the team took a lap in the car on the Milford Proving Ground before work began, so that each could share their own interpretations of what a 50-year-old suspension was like, and how it needed to be improved. GM Techs Gobart, Orlando, and Kevin Schultz looked over the big-block Ram Jet 502 before it got torn apart. Notice the guys crouching under the original '57 Chevy's low-opening hood—the GM team would correct this to bring this '57 Chevy into the modern era.

With 50 years of service and millions of readers served, we were looking for the next great adventure for Project X. So you can understand why we were so excited when General Motors came calling. The concept for this latest build was first initiated in January 2007. GM Performance Parts, a long-time contributor to the development of Project X, was working up its marketing strategy for the launch of a new line of 427-inch big-block crate engines featuring the Anniversary 427 ZL1 big-block (see “Big-Block Birthday,” page 66). The Anniversary engine celebrates 50 years of great GM big-blocks [for sticklers, we’re counting the “W” engine predecessor, known as the Mark I. -ed] with a modern interpretation of the legendary ZL1 Chevy big-block. Looking to stuff this monster into a '57 Chevy, the hunt had begun for a clean car to use as starting material for an '07 SEMA build car. A chance discussion between Dr. Jamie Meyer of GM Performance Parts and Mike Copeland of GM Performance Division (two of the teammates who brought GM the Reggie Jackson '69 Camaro in 2006) inquired as to the whereabouts of Project X. At Copeland's urging, Meyer approached Doug Evans, senior VP at *PHR's* publisher, Source Interlink Media, and the deal was struck. Project X was going back to GM!

As with any new GM vehicle, you start with a cutting-edge design and build to it. The first amazing part of Project X's journey was when ace GM Designer Dave Ross put pen to paper. Ross was only a small boy when the first article on Project X hit the newsstand in 1965. But he asked his mom to

**“I couldn't believe it when they asked me to draw Project X! I still have the first issue of *Popular Hot Rodding* the car appeared in.”**  
—Dave Ross, GM designer



GM hasn't forgotten the interior. The flat sheetmetal and racy gauges will be replaced with a nicely integrated package. Look for major improvements in fit and finish as well as quality of materials—just like current GM vehicles. The interior was traditional hot rod, including a multipoint rollcage, bucket seats, and a billet shifter. Some finesse changes will make this ride look better and be more usable.



Major changes are in store for the '57's frame. We'll be bringing you full details on how GM narrowed, strengthened, and mixed in an entire C6 Corvette front end to this. The rear tubs will separate this car as well. Here, the original '57 Chevy sheetmetal was lifted off the frame, in preparation for lots of rework.



Original artwork straight from the GM Design Center separates this build from any other. It's not every day that a 50-year-old hot rod gets a refresh with all of the talents, creativity, and skill of GM design professionals. Dave Ross, the same man who designed the Reggie Jackson '69 Camaro for GM's '06 SEMA display, did the honors on Project X for 2007. Ross owns his own '57 Chevy—tubbed, blown, and running a Jerico four-speed for good measure. Its inspiration came directly from what Ross read about Project X as a young man.



Project X may look the same to some, but GM has designed a lot of subtle upgrades for the car. Side exhaust, a killer retro rim design, a lowered stance with full tire travel, and a functional ram air hood only hint at the work ahead.



The GM fabrication team building this car routinely creates “production cars” that won’t exist for five to 10 years in the future, so they are the best of the best in the business. While Project X is a “redo,” they went about the job like they do with their regular assignments. This includes affixing the car to a surface plate equipped with digital measuring arms that allow them to measure to within 0.001 inch in the X, Y, and Z planes. This capability was used copiously during the project with spectacular results.



Here’s a tip-off to some of the changes that are on the table—notice the blue tape around the “bullet” trim on the hood? Yep, the GM team is going to update these iconic pieces! Look for changes like this all over Project X (both in-your-face and subtle) when it is done!

**“Project X is the most influential hot rod in the history of our industry. It’s the ultimate showcase for our new big-block.”**

*—Lisa Reffett, GM Performance Parts*

pay the 50 cents for the magazine, and as soon as he got it home, he started drawing pictures of Project X. He liked drawing pictures of cars so much that he decided that was what he was going to focus his life’s ambition on: drawing and designing cars for GM. Now 42 years later, Dave Ross is one of the leading car designers in the world, owing a lot of it to his inspiration as a youth: Project X. Imagine how surreal it must have been for Dave to be handed this project. “Hey, we’ve got this ’57 Chevy that we’d like you to turn into a modern GM interpretation of a Pro Street car,” we imagine them asking him. “They call it Project X. Have you heard of the car?”

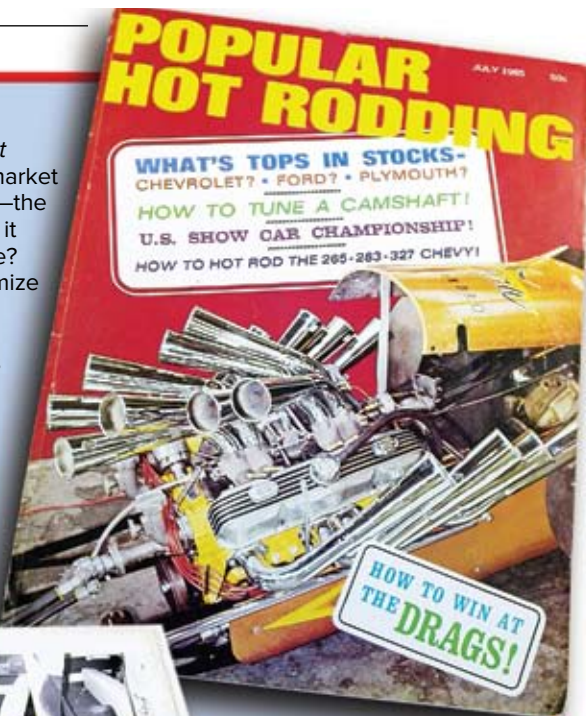
Oh, the irony, given his background, and the fact that Ross has his own tubbed and blown ’57 that he takes out on local Detroit cruises. And so it was Ross, with solid input from leading car builder (and talented GM employee) Mike Copeland, who blazed the path for Project X’s latest incarnation. Copeland demanded a Pro Street stance that will be as functional as it is fashionable. Ross drew up a stunner: low-slung street-dominating lines, updated 210 chrome trim, side-exit exhaust, and a new rim inspired by an aftermarket ad that he still remembers from that first Project X issue.

Copeland barked out orders for a melded modern chassis, existing somewhere between the modern and the original ’57, with heavy C6 Corvette influencing and substructures. He also challenged his team to develop a modern Pro Street four-link rear; we’ll share actual GM math data for all of you aspiring Project X followers. Assuredly, this type of work could not be duplicated in one’s home garage. Instead, Project X will get the same type of state-of-the-art engineering that has brought GM to the top of the heap in today’s automotive world.

## FLASHBACK: JULY 1965

Project X's humble roots began in the July 1965 issue of *Popular Hot Rodding*, where it started life as a test bed for the burgeoning aftermarket parts business. The original story copy would prove prophetic: "You—the readers of *Popular Hot Rodding*—are hereby invited to suggest how it should be placed in first-class shape. What should the initial steps be? What should the ultimate objective be? Street rod? Strip rod? Customize it? Make it a show car? A go car? You tell us!

"Let's go a step further. Maybe there's a specific item of speed equipment you'd like to see installed. It can be done, shown how it's done, and what the results are. Maybe the 283 should be replaced. How about trying a 396-incher in it? No? Well, then, we can try a 327—or any other and show you just how we do it." Since those words were written, the little '57 has seen just about every modification possible. We don't think in their wildest dreams the original editors of *PHR* would've guessed how many parts and iterations this '57 has seen, and now it's getting the ultimate makeover in the innermost sanctum of GM—the hallowed GM Design Center in Warren, Michigan.—*Johnny Hunkins*



### SOURCES:

**GM PERFORMANCE PARTS**  
800-577-6888 (to locate your nearest GMPP dealer)  
[www.gmperformanceparts.com](http://www.gmperformanceparts.com)

**GM PERFORMANCE DIVISION**  
[www.gmperformancedivision.com](http://www.gmperformancedivision.com)



How is GM going to have a side exhaust integrated into the front fenders? Stay tuned. We've got those secrets and more, as Project X enjoys a rebirth after a return trip to GM.

As we'll show you throughout the next few months, the details of this build may be unlike anything you've ever seen in the hot rod universe. When an entire car company brings back a 50-year-old friend, miracles can happen. A functional ram air '57 hood, a "hidden" tub job, front fender substructures, and CNC-cut hand-painted emblems and aluminum trim are just the start of what will be an amazing journey for Project X. We plan on bringing it all to you with coverage never seen before in *PHR*—from every last drop of the Corvette Z06 yellow paint, to a final testdrive and evaluation that will take your breath away.

It's Project X's return trip home to GM, a car build that will be matched by no other. And, you'll read it all here in *Popular Hot Rodding*. **PHR**