



MAKING "SIC" CARS AT SCOTT'S INSANE CHOPS

BY ASHLEY MAJESKI SMISSEN | PHOTOS: SIC CHOPS

Scott Laitinen and his team at SIC Chops are known for their big, low cars, but this amazing Lake Havasu City-based shop can do a lot more than just insane chops!

When Scott Laitinen came to Lake Havasu City 16 years ago, he had \$1,000 in his pocket and a desire to build cool things. Although he was working in sales at first, Laitinen was spending his nights and weekends quenching his thirst to build cool stuff by creating custom bikes and motorcycles. Although he was very successful in the custom bike community, Laitinen, who was running a bike shop called Scott's Insane Chops, eventually decided he wanted to build something bigger than a bike...something much bigger.

"I was raised in the custom paint and hot rod world, but when I came to Havasu, the bike industry was really hot," Laitinen said. "After the bottom blew out of the motorcycle industry, no one wanted high-dollar bikes. At that time I was already building cars again, so it was easy to transition to building cars."

Laitinen decided to devote his business to building hot rods. Luckily, the name of his bike shop—Scott's Insane Chops—was still applicable, as the cars that he was building were wild, innovative and, of course, chopped.

"I started going by SIC Chops, with 'SIC' standing for Scott's Insane Chops," he said. "It's a multifaceted name that I was able to throw over. When someone sees a nice car in general, one of the catchphrases they always say is, 'That's sick!' so it really worked."

The first big project Laitinen took on at his hot rod shop was building a black 1960 Cadillac from the ground-up. It was a fitting first endeavor for the new builder, who, at that time was working with only one helper.

"I like big, black cars," he said. "Building cars and other cool stuff is where my passion is. It streams through my blood. I'll build anything—bikes, barbeques—but I

love to create cool big black cars."

Laitinen built the entire car nearly on his own, doing all of the paint and body work, as well as the metal fabrication and chassis work and finishing it in six months for customer David Hoekstra.

"That was my first full-fledged ground-up car that I built," Laitinen said.

The car, with its wicked fins, sleek black paint and blood-red interior, certainly got noticed on the Goodguys show circuit. In fact, it was named a Custom of the Year finalist for 2012.

"It was overwhelming," Laitinen said of the recognition he received so early into his hot rod building career. "We took a gigantic car that a lot of people are afraid to work with and made it timeless."

LEAVING A MARK ON THE INDUSTRY

The '60 Cadillac was just the beginning for Laitinen and Hoekstra's professional relationship. As soon as that car was completed, Hoekstra and his wife Sherry came to Laitinen with another big, black car they wanted him to build for them: a Lincoln Continental.

"She asked me what I was going to do to top the Caddy," Laitinen said. "From that point, it was game on! I try to take that approach with every car we build. You're constantly trying to tip the scale, and constantly trying to one-up what you've done in the past. Some people are built for redundancy and like to build the same car over and over, but I don't like it."

The Hoekstras are just two of Laitinen's regular customers. Most of the cars he

The SIC Chops team stands in front of the "Bos Bus," a 1961 23-window VW Bus owned by customers AJ and Kate Bos. Laitinen says that he enjoys doing all sorts of vehicles, and has rebuilt a few other VWs. "We'll do just about anything as long as we can do it from the ground-up," he says.



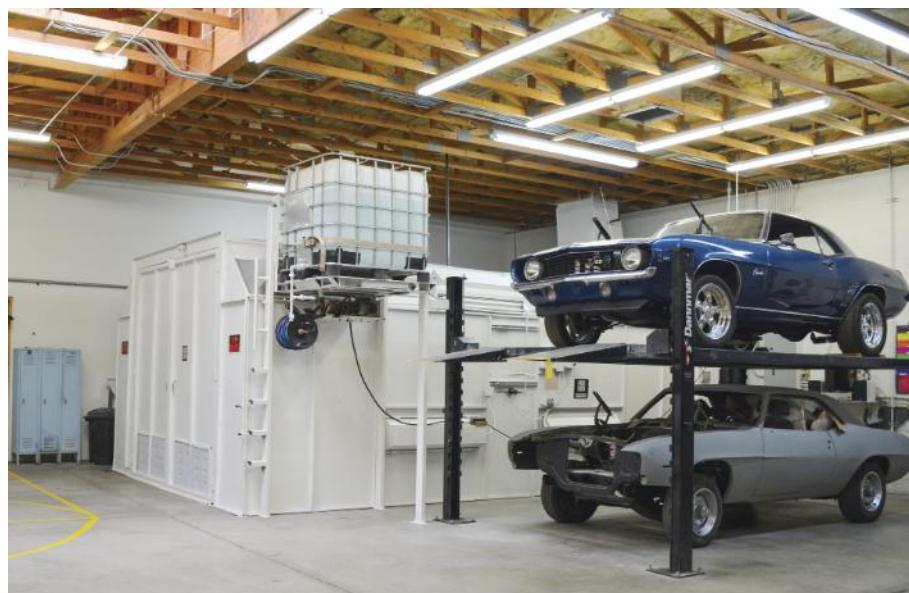
SIC Chops' owner Scott Laitinen stands in the shop's fabrication and assembly room. You can find Laitinen at the shop sometimes up to 16 hours a day. "A lot of people don't get why I work so hard, but it's what I do best," he says. "I love building cool stuff."



Laitinen's stepson, Kaiden Cirby, works as an assistant at the shop. Here, he's shown welding something for a top secret project that the team is working on. (Laitinen won't spill any details on the car—but promises that it will be very cool!)



This room is where up-and-coming projects are stored. Most of the cars done at the shop are for the same four to six guys, Laitinen says, but he picks up new customers as well. Shown here are a '61 Impala flat top, a '56 Buick Special convertible, Linkin's '61 Continental, a '39 Merc and a '61 VW bus.



The shop team is currently working on these two '69 Camaros, which are shown sitting on lifts in front of the shop's paint booth.

and his team have built in the last five years or so have been for the same four to six customers.

"I've got a good following and a strong clientele," he said. "I rotate building cars for the same group of people. They're all friends and they see the progression of what we're doing on the other guys' builds, and they bring in more cars for us to work on once that one is finished."

Luckily, Laitinen has been able to hire a small staff and expand to a bigger shop to keep the pace his customers demand.

"We have grown so much in the past two years, and I'm still trying to catch my breath!" he said. "We went from a facility of about 2,500 sq. ft. and one helper for me, to a 9,000-square foot facility, with a blast facility, an office manager and three employees. It was huge growth for us, so I needed to pull the reigns back and focus on the builds at hand."

Builds like that Continental for the Hoekstras, for instance. Laitinen had just completed a 1939 Lincoln Zephyr for David Hoekstra's father, Louie, who is another one of SIC Chops' regular customers, so he was finally able to devote time to building the 1956 Continental Mark II.

"We built that car to compete for Goodguys Custom of the Year," Laitinen said. "That was our intention all along, and it was a nerve-racking build. We did that car in three calendar months, and I worked on the car 16 hours a day, six to seven days a week. Basically, we put six months worth of work into that car in three months. There was never a point in time during the build that David ever questioned that we would make our goal. He knew I was just as determined to do it as he was."

Laitinen achieved his goal and debuted the car at the Goodguys All American Get-Together in Pleasanton in March of 2015. Although he was confident in the car—with its one-off chassis from The Roadster Shop, custom Ron Mangus interior, 2 1/2-inch chop and many custom modifications—Laitinen said he was nervous to introduce the car to the show circuit.

"It was a huge risk, and a huge amount of pressure to follow up the '60 Caddy," Laitinen said. "There was a great lineup of cars, all built by these great builders. It's an honor to compete with them, but at the end of the day, I am more in competition with myself. I'm always trying to one-up myself and my past work. When you start looking at what the competition is doing, you're going in the wrong direction."

The '56 Continental would go on to win Goodguys' 2015 Custom of the Year award. It was the perfect ending to a sometimes frantic building process.

"Our risk paid off, and it was a huge honor," Laitinen said. "Even to just be part of the Goodguys competition was a huge honor. You are competing alongside the guys who are building some of the best cars on the market."

ALL IN THE FAMILY

While Laitinen is devoted to building cool cars, he's also a dedicated family man. Luckily, several of Laitinen's family members work with him at the shop, so he's able to spend time with them even while he's working.

"My oldest stepson, Kaiden Cirby, works as a shop assistant and my wife Samantha is our office manager," Laitinen said.

Continued on Page 173

SHOP PROFILE



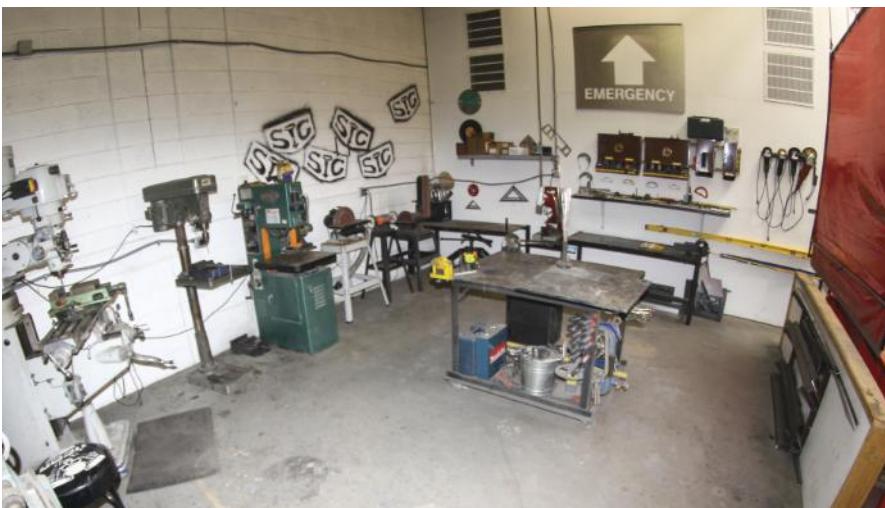
The shop's fabricator Noel Castillo is shown TIG-welding a three-inch stainless steel exhaust.



Luke Nordby handles all of the shop's blasting tasks. Laitinen had the blasting booth installed when they moved into their current building three years ago because he wanted to be able to do it in-house instead of having to farm it out. "It helps to ensure that it is being done to the shop's standards," he says.



In this flashback shot from 2011, a (beardless!) Scott is shown polishing up customer David Hoekstra's 1960s Caddy to get it ready for a Goodguys show. The car would go on to be a Goodguys Custom of the Year finalist at the 2012 All American Get-Together.



A look inside SIC Chops' fabrication area, which features a mill and lathes. The shop also has its own on-site media and sand-blasting areas.

OUT OF THE SHOP



One of the latest cars to come out of SIC Chops is this custom '62 Impala. The car features eye-catching one-off wheels by Colorado Custom, just like all of the cars that come out of the shop. (Photo by Rodding Revolutions)



David Hoekstra's 1956 Continental Mark II took home the Goodguys 2015 Custom of the Year award. The car, which Hoekstra calls "Mae," is one of many that SIC Chops has built for him. (Photo by RoddingRevolutions.com)



The 1959 Caddy built by SIC Chops for Rich Tillema features a one-off Roadster Shop chassis, one-off Colorado Custom wheels, and a 650-hp Cadillac CTS-V LSA power plant with a 6L80 transmission. Other features include air ride by AccuAir and a custom Ron Mangus red leather interior. (Photo by RoddingRevolutions.com)



Although SIC Chops has been doing a lot of what Laitinen calls "long gangster-looking cars" lately, they will build just about anything for their customers—from VW bugs to muscle cars such as this '69 Camaro. "I have a variety of customers so we build a variety of cars," he says. (Photo by Rodding Revolutions)



Laitinen is shown painting a 1965 Schwinn Phantom bicycle for a customer who wanted it restored because it's a family heirloom. Earlier in his career, Laitinen used to make custom bikes, and he'll still take on unique projects for his customers. "There's nothing I won't do for my customers!" he said. "Plus, it's nice to do different stuff from time to time."



"We're a hot rodding family," Laitinen says, adding that his wife and oldest stepson work at the shop with him. (From left) Kaiden Cirby, Presli Laitinen, Samantha Laitinen, Linkin Laitinen, Scott Laitinen and Seth Cirby. The '64 Lincoln Continental convertible behind the family was built at the shop for customer David Hoekstra.

Laitinen's young son, Linkin, will eventually be the owner of this 1961 Lincoln Continental. The car's original owner was TV star Desi Arnaz.

"I'm always trying to one-up myself. When you start looking at how the competition is doing, you're going the wrong direction."

— Scott Laitinen



The shop's other employees— fabricator and body man Noel Castillo, graphic design and wrap man Scott Smith, and blaster Luke Nordby—are also like family, and have made keeping a fast pace much easier for Laitinen. Still, Laitinen continues to work on all parts of the builds at his shop.

"It's my business so I have to be able to do everything—assemble, paint, buff—everything," he said. "I have three great employees but at the end of the day no one will do it for me. This is my passion and for me to be successful, I've got to have my hands in everything."

This desire to have a hand in all parts of the build is the reason that Laitinen has brought much of the work in-house. The shop, which sits only a few blocks from Lake Havasu, has its own dedicated on-site media- and sand-blasting area, paint booth, fabrication area and more. Currently, the shop only outsources interior work (to industry legend Ron Mangus), engine building to Jon Kaase and chassis work to The Roadster Shop. Colorado Custom provides the wheels for all SIC Chops cars.

"Keeping things in-house allows us to ensure that the quality of work going into our cars is up to our standards," Laitinen said.

BUILDING RIDES FOR REGULARS

While the big, black cars coming out of SIC Chops have gotten Laitinen and his team a lot of attention lately, Laitinen says he is open to building just about anything, as long as it is a full, ground-up car.

"I've tailored my business to build complete cars," he said. "When the customers come to us, they know we'll turn out a complete car in a year or less."

The shop currently has all sorts of projects in the works, including a '61 Suburban, a '51 split-window VW bug, a race boat and a few other projects that Laitinen is keeping on the down-low. Each car, however, is different from any that SIC Chops has done before.

"I have a variety of regular customers, so we build a variety of cars," he said. "I get my enjoyment out of building cars so they stand out. I get to put creativity and imagination into every build we do, whether it be a modern style, or a retro car or a radical car. Where my passion comes in is having the range to be able to build an outlandish car."

Laitinen's "regulars" continue to push him to do different and more challenging projects. Each customer has certain tastes and characteristics of cars that they like, which keeps the builds interesting for Laitinen and his team.

"For one customer, it's all about the accessories," he said. "Each customer has a motif that they like. That works out well because I don't like doing the same thing over and over again. I get phone calls from people requesting mirror-image versions of cars we've done, but I won't do it. I want each car to have its own identity. My customers have given me a lot of range."

While Laitinen says he'll build just about anything for his customers, he's always happy when he gets to work on a big, black car.

"For my customer David Hoekstra, every car we build for him is low, long and hammered to the ground," he said, adding that he's built eight cars for David and his father. "All of the cars are black, or at least a dark color. They're all radical customs, which I really enjoy doing. That's really where my heart is."

HAVING FUN IN HAVASU

Lake Havasu is known for its wild times and water sports, but Laitinen says that the hot rod bug also runs rampant in his town.

"There are about six hot rod shops here in town, but the hot rod per capita of people is astronomical here!" he said. "Havasu is a hot rod Mecca!"

Laitinen, a Milwaukee native who moved to Havasu in 1999, is confident that he made the right choice in where he built his business.

"I was over the cold and wanted to be where it was warm and there was water," he said. "All of my customers are either part-time or full-time Havasu residents, and they are all good friends."

Laitinen is living his dream, building cool cars in the Arizona sun.

"I pretty much wear shorts all year-round," he said. "I build custom cars for my friends. It's a great life." 🍷

Scott's Insane Chops (SIC Chops)

537 Lake Havasu Ave N., Ste. 102
Lake Havasu City, Arizona
(928) 486-7068

Owner:
Scott Laitinen
sicchops.com