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Custom 1956 Chevrolet & Ford Panel Trucks - Two For The Road

Two Different Truck Builds Bring Together Lovers Of '56 Panels

By Scott Keyes

Photography by Mike Basso



It is funny how a truck build can bring two people together, who didn't even know one another three years ago but now call themselves the best of friends.

That's what happened to Bernie Gates of Laguna Hills, California, and David Gongora of Pomona, California. Their love of panel trucks and hot rods sparked up conversations during Gates' buildup of his '56 Ford F-150 Panel truck, and ever since then, the two hot-rod-lovers have stayed in close contact.

Oftentimes, the conversations revolved around their next big buildup, but Gongora said most of the time it's just small talk, like the initial conversation that sparked up their friendship.

"In the car business, you run into the same people at car shows or at other shops that happen to be doing work for you on your vehicle," Gates said. "Well, three years ago I ran into David, and we just started talking about panel trucks, and ever since then we have become pretty good friends."

Gates started working on his '56 Ford Panel four years ago, meanwhile Gongora started his build on his '56 Chevy Panel truck two years later, but it only took a year to complete. Meanwhile, Gates, who finally finished his build in June, poured his heart and soul into his four-year buildup. When Gates started his project, he initially thought the truck was going to be used as just a daily driver. When he spoke with various people, including Gongora, his daily driver concept blew up into one of the hottest '56 Ford Panel trucks in the country.

"I got done with my truck in 2005, and when I got finished, Bernie and I used some of the tricks of the trade that I used on my truck and instrumented into Bernie's build," Gongora said. "Even though we didn't know each other before our builds, it is funny to see how similar each of these trucks look. I guess you never know what life has in store for you"

The street-van craze wave crested decades ago along with bell-bottom jeans, shag carpet, and waterbeds. However, we're seeing more of these Tri-Five panel trucks being built with the same attention to detail as some of the outdoor-event award-winning pickups, for the obvious reasons of affordability and versatility. In

addition, all the modern pickup suspension parts and engine accessories are equally comfortable when bolted to a panel truck.

Gongora and Gates are old enough to remember the van craze, but because they knew about these trucks while in high school, they also remembered how many friends they could haul around in comfort. When Gongora came across this particular '56 Chevy Panel truck several years ago, his memories of high-school good times brought back a desire to have a very cool vintage vehicle that could be a catalyst for friends and fun.

When you look at Gates' '56 Ford versus Gongora's '56 Chevrolet, the only real difference between the two makes of trucks is the frame.

The Chevrolet frame sits lower to the ground in nature, but Gongora took the lowering concept one step farther and chopped the truck 2 inches and channeled the rear section to give his truck an even lower look.

Unlike Gates' truck, which is a little more subtle than Gongora's, he still has more chrome and bling than most trucks of this era.



Gongora has taken his '56 Chevy truck to places where some builders have never gone before.

After being reeled in by the super-straight body panels and Amber-Fire paint, the admirers of this panel truck were delighted to find an interior that had an equal amount of sex appeal. Sean Dunn of Advanced Stereo installed a Kenwood stereo, TV/DVD/CD super sound system, to complement the abundance of laser light and color-changing fiber optics.

Gongora's good friend, Doc Hildebrant of Artful Expressions Auto Interiors, is responsible for the interior mood with its combination of suede leather, snakeskin, and plush carpet. There's also an inviting handbuilt bar and rear bench seat to attract partygoers to Gongora's rolling rock concert.

In fact, all the details of Gongora's panel truck add a resemblance to the comfortable van interiors of the '60s and '70s-not an accident for this experienced body shop owner. And when we've observed Gongora at local events, there's always a crowd of admirers gathered around, enjoying the sound system while examining the interior details.

With Gongora's ride stealing all of the props for its stunning interior and audio system, Gates' '56 Ford also has all the bells and whistles that other custom rides of this era have.

From building the custom-built grille to incorporating the parking lights into the front bumper, you can see the fine craftsmanship and the fabricating skills that went into building this truck.

"I mean, every time I thought I was done with the truck, I saw something else I wanted to do. So, basically, what was supposed to be a year or two turned into four years," Gates said. "When I was growing up, my dad and I built this really cool '56 pickup truck, so when I saw this particular panel truck, I knew I needed to have it, especially one that was as clean as this one when I got it. That was the key."

As you probably already know, Gongora and Gates are both car buffs from way back, but their love of cars has also caught on at home. Gates has five children, with four of the five sporting old-school horsepower in the driveway. This includes his wife, Laurie, who owns a '65 El Camino and a '36 Ford Panel, while his two youngest kids, Eric, 18, and Cody, 16, own a '70 Chevelle and a '67 El Camino. His oldest daughter, Amy, 36, sports a '70 Chevy Nova, and his oldest son, Darrell, 27, can be seen driving around in a '56 Chevy Delivery Truck.

"We have always been a car family, and the kids fell in love with cars just like I did," Gates said. "My daughter, Desiree, is the only one of my five children who doesn't own a custom car. Who knows? She may catch on, eventually."

While this buildup was Gongora's fifth panel truck he has restored, his love of cars can be traced way back. His personal car collection runs at least 10 deep, with most of the vehicles highlighted being late-model sedans, along with his stunning '56 Chevy Panel truck. His collection of cars ranges from a '60 Oldsmobile Super 88 to a '62 Nomad Wagon and a '51 Mercury, to his daily driver a '56 Chevy Wagon.

However, the '56 Chevy Panel truck remains one of his most prized builds.

"Between the build of my truck, and with Bernie getting his truck done, I think we have two of the coolest panel trucks in Southern California," Gongora said. "I don't think that is too big of a bold statement to feel that way."





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The 411

Owner/hometown:

Bernie Gates / Laguna Hills, California

Year/make/model:

'56 Ford F-150 Panel [truck](#)

Engine/drivetrain:

ZZ 430 small-block / Street Performance fuel injection / Bow Tie 700-R4 transmission / Currie Enterprises
Ford 9-inch / 3.73 gearing

BY: Bernie Gates

Rims:**Front:** 18x7-Inch Boyd Coddington**Rear:** 18x8-Inch Boyd Coddington**Tires:****Front:** Bridgestone 235/55ZR18**Rear:** Bridgestone 255/55ZR18**Suspension:****Front:** Mustang II IFS / Air Ride Technologies Shockwaves**Rear:** Four-link / custom frame and fuel tank / Air Ride Technologies Shockwaves**Accessories:** Air Ride Technologies 3/8-inch solenoids / 3/8-inch air lines / 5-gallon reserve tank**Chassis:** C-notched frameroads**BY:** Walton Fabrication, of Upland, California / Bernie Gates, of Prestige Auto Collision, in Laguna Hills / Precision Fabrication, in San Clemente**Body Mods:**

2-inch choptop / shaved door handles, taillights, marker lights, and antenna / filled seams

BY: Bernie Gates, of Prestige Auto Collision**Custom Paint:**

PPG Sierra Blue with Dark Blue Pearl

BY: Color Masters of Laguna Hills / William Wiperman / Alberto Rodriguez of Prestige Auto Collision**Interior:**

Gray leather, No Limit Engineering ball-milled billet six-gauge dash cluster / ididit tilt-steering column

topped with a Billet Specialties leather-wrapped wheel / billet vents / Vintage Air A/C

BY: Jeff Oberman, owner of Styles Pinstriping / Interior's of Mission Viejo, California**Audio/Video**17-inch flat-screen entertainment system / Alpine head unit / JL Audio 10-inch subs / 2,000-watt JL Audio amps / [Boston Acoustics](#) mids and highs**BY:** Pro-Installs**Club:**

N/A

Special Thanks:

David Gongora



The 411

Owner/Hometown:

David Gongora, Pomona, California

Year/Make/Model:

'56 [Chevy](#) Panel truck

Engine/Drivetrain:

Stroker Chevy 383ci engine / TRW pistons / GM Performance Parts camshaft / Dart II heads / Edelbrock intake manifold / AFB carburetor / Doug Thorley headers / Flowmaster mufflers / 700-R4 AOD transmission / stainless steel exhaust exits out the rear quarter panel

BY: Rancho Valley [Chevrolet](#) in Pomona, California (engine) / The Toy Shop (transmission)

Rims:

Front: Colorado Customs 20x10-Inch

Rear: Colorado Customs 20x10-Inch

Tires:

Front: 255/35zr20 Pirelli

Rear: 255/45zr20 Pirelli

Suspension:

Front/Rear: Four-Way Disc Brakes / TCI IFS With Power Rack-And-Pinion Steering

Accessories: N/A

Chassis: N/A

BY: Pauly's Fabrications, in Chino, California

Body Mods:

2-1/2-inch choptop / rear section of body channeled 4 inches / mid-'80s Cadillac taillights / double rear doors were modified with '02 Chevy Suburban hinges / back-up camera mounted in the rear

BY: David Gongora

Custom Paint:

Amber-Fire

BY: David Gongora's Body and Paint

**Interior:**

Limo styling / layered lighting / laser-light show / suede / leather / snakeskin / cut-pile carpet

BY: Artful Expressions [Auto](#) Interiors

Audio/Video:

Kenwood TV/DVD/CD sound system / laser light and color-changing fiber optics

BY: Sean Dunn, of Advance Stereo in Pomona, California

Club:

N/A

Special Thanks:

Bernie Gates