

AMERICAN GRAFFITI

Stepping Into Sweden's Vibrant Classic-Car Market



Courtesy Christofer Willhans

Since 2004, the SEMA Global Media Awards program has been a staple of the SEMA Show. Journalists from throughout the world come to the Show with the purpose of identifying 10 new products displayed in the event's New Products Showcase that are likely to succeed in their home countries. The participating media represent some of the industry's top magazines, and the editors are among the most respected in the world.

SEMA News spoke with Christofer Lee Willhans, a seven-time Global Media Awards judge from Sweden. (See p. 174 for the selections he made at some of the most recent SEMA Shows.) We spoke with Willhans about his country's classic-car market to gain some insights into how that market compares with the classic

American-car restoration market and the opportunities it provides for U.S. manufacturers of classic-car parts.

SEMA News: *Christofer, thanks for joining us today. Please tell us a little about yourself and when you first became a car enthusiast.*

■ SEMA is hosting an inaugural Nordic Business Development Program to Sweden to allow SEMA members to explore firsthand the customizing market in the Nordic region (Sweden, Finland, Norway and Denmark). For more information, contact lindas@sema.org. Pictured are Swedes in the small town of Falun participating in the annual classic car cruise featuring an estimated 1500 classic (mostly U.S.) cars.

Christofer Willhans: I was born and raised in Sweden—born car crazy and the only one back in those years in our small town with such a strange yet strong interest. But when I found a car magazine called *Hot Rod* in Stockholm in 1959, I knew I



Courtesy Christofer Willhans

■ A surprising number of classic cars can be found on the streets of Sweden and nearby Norway and Finland starting on Easter and throughout the summer. Numerous car events draw large crowds, including the event pictured above from the small town of Rättvik during Classic Car Week. Willhans described the cruise pictured above as a “rolling museum.”

wasn't alone, and I was really hooked.

My first car was a '34 Ford Tudor V8 that didn't run. I was kind of scared of it. There was so much stuff on a car compared to the two-stroke, 50cc burnt moped wreck that I just used to teach myself restoring, including spray painting.

SN: *We recently visited Sweden and the neighboring countries of Finland and Norway. We were impressed with how much of the market is do-it-yourself.*

CLW: Like many other guys, I learned how to fix a car out of necessity. I had a very strong desire for a nice ride, and the only way to get one was to fix one myself on a shoestring. Money was tight, but time was free, so you did put a lot of time into the project to compensate for the money. Mostly it worked.

Today, I can rebuild most parts of a car, shape metal panels for rust repairs, weld and paint, and I even became a professional wood grainer. We mostly still restore the cars ourselves with help from friends, except some things like engine restoration or paint and interior, where we usually

need help from professionals. But we also have the option of a full restoration completed by one of many restoration shops established during the last 30 years.

SN: *You mentioned the very high per-capita number of vintage vehicles in Sweden, a country of 10 million. We understand that a large number of classic cars came from the United States to Sweden during the oil crisis in the '70s when many gas-guzzling cars were abandoned and vehicles from the '50s to '70s were easy to find and relatively inexpensive.*

CLW: From the late '70s and for at least 20 years on, we imported 15,000 antique cars a year, mostly from the United States. Then it decreased, but it never stopped. Most of the imported cars were in fair to good shape, and a few were in perfect condition. But most cars needed improvements. The same applies today as well.

SN: *We understand that you personally have an impressive and eclectic car collection. Can you tell us a little about it?*

CLW: My greatest love was American cars. Today, I have 14 American cars in my collection, together with some English, a few German and even a French one—a Citroen DS. Of course, I also have some Swedish cars, like a two-stroke, three-cylinder '60 Saab with a groundbreaking 38hp strong engine. That motor has only seven moving parts, so not much can go wrong, can it?

Some of my cars with more parts are a '66 Jaguar MK X, '48 Buick Roadmaster convertible and '38 Buick sedan delivery—the only one in the world made in Oslo, Norway. Another rare one is a '31 Chevrolet Speedster, built in Copenhagen, Denmark. It's probably not a one-off, but as far as I know, the one we have is the only one left. The first owner happened to be His Royal Highness Prince Viggo of Denmark, and the Speedster was twice the price of an ordinary new Chevy.

SN: *We were impressed with how many Swedes own and love vintage Detroit vehicles. Can you talk a little about the breadth of the Swedish hobby?*

INTERNATIONAL



Courtesy Christofer Willhans

■ Referencing classic car events in Sweden, Willhans observed, “When you attend with your car, you kind of drive into a different time zone, because the majority of the cars in the streets are collector cars. You may kind of believe that you are driving your car into the movie *American Graffiti*. One will notice collector car license plates from Denmark, Norway, Finland, Germany, Netherlands and England during that week, as well as Swedish, of course.”

Christofer Willhans' Global Media Awards Choices (Selected at the 2017–2019 SEMA Shows)

Company/Product

- **All-Fit Automotive:** All-Fit Rim Trim
- **CFR Performance:** Black Pearl—Black Chrome Edition Dress-Up Kit
- **CFR Performance:** Vintage Finned Tall LS Valve Covers, Black Satin
- **CFR Performance:** 13-in. Finned Coolant Tank
- **Cragar Wheel and Black Rock Wheel:** Series 08/61 S/S and Series 61C S/S
- **Drake Automotive Group:** Scott Drake Legendary Wheels LW-60 GT8 Series
- **E-Motion USA:** Custom Truck/SUV Steering Wheel for New Ford Ranger
- **Flaming River Industries Inc.:** VDOG Variable Angle Gear
- **Hiwosport:** 3D Weave Exhaust Wrap
- **Holley/MSD:** Mallory Unilite Three-Bolt Ford Flathead
- **JJ'S Rods and JJ'S E-Z Boots:** Brake and Clutch Pedal Rubber Boot Seal
- **JJ'S Rods and JJ'S E-Z Boots:** Steering Column Firewall Rubber Boot Seal
- **JMD Perfertubeshop:** Oval Pie Cuts
- **Kleinn Air Horns:** 6350RC Waterproof Heavy-Duty Air Compressor
- **KNS/Grand General Accessories:** '47-'54 Chevrolet Truck Grille and Bumper Guard
- **KNS/Grand General Accessories Manufacturer:** LED Safety Star License Plate Topper
- **Lokar Inc.:** LS Classic Engine Package
- **Maradyne/SuperTrapp/PMAS:** 5.2-in. Oil/Transmission Cooler Fan
- **Metra Electronics:** iBeam Replacement Mirror Monitor and Camera Kit
- **Mothers Polishes-Waxes-Cleaners:** Mothers PowerCone 360
- **NFS Sport International:** Need for Speed Accessories
- **Northern Radiator:** Interchangeable Threaded Inlet Radiator
- **NRG Offroad:** SFI Quick Release
- **Rightline Gear:** Anti-Theft Trailer Coupler Ball and Lock
- **Show Cars Automotive Inc.:** Chevrolet 409 Valve Cover
- **Steele Rubber Products:** '61-'63 Lincoln Continental Convertible Roof Rail Kit
- **Unisteer Performance:** Chevy II/Nova Electra-Steer Column Kit
- **Wheel Vintiques:** Jumbo Hot Rod Wheel
- **Wilwood Disc Brakes:** Tandem Brake and Hydraulic Clutch Pedal Kit



■ Christofer Willhans has served as a SEMA Show Global Media Awards judge for seven years. Pictured here is Willhans (right) and his wife Charlotte at the 2019 SEMA Show International Happy Hour.

CLW: Collector-car interest in Sweden is more than great. If we count the collector cars per capita, I'm sure Sweden has more such cars per capita than the United States. During the spring and summer and into September, there are car shows, swap meets and many local meets throughout Sweden. The summer season starts during Easter time, with a big indoor car show where legends such as Gene Winfield, George Barris, Chip Foose and many more have attended over the years.

Small and big car shows go on all over Sweden the whole summer, and almost every town in Sweden has at least one cruise every year on the main street—and a cruise in Sweden means moving cars, not parked. Living out in the country like we do—a 30-minute drive to the nearest red light—we still have several local shows to attend. The closest one, 10 minutes away in the nearby town Leksand, usually gathers some 250 to 400 cars once a month. Not bad for a small town out in the country!

In Rättvik, the next small town, we have Classic Car Week once a year,

where we voluntarily worked the first 14 years, and it was an absolutely fantastic experience, going from maybe 60 cars the first year to thousands and thousands of cars today. And yes, it actually goes on for a week.

When you attend with your car, you kind of drive into a different time zone, because the majority of the cars in the streets are collector cars. You might even believe that you are driving your car into the movie *American Graffiti*. One will notice collector-car license plates from Denmark, Norway, Finland, Germany, Netherlands and England during that week, as well as Swedish, of course.

SN: *We understand that Swedish companies have ventured into producing hard-to-find parts for vintage cars.*

CLW: There are many more difficult or impossible parts you really can't find, [but there are] New Old Stock auto parts also available today, thanks to being reproduced in Sweden or elsewhere. If we in this hobby can't find a part, we make it, otherwise we won't get our cars out on the street. Sweden is also at the forefront of reproduction parts, like padded dashboard tops. When you buy a new padded dashboard top for your '59 Cadillac and it fits perfectly, it's almost 100% sure that it's made in Sweden.

SN: *You have served for many years as a SEMA Show Global Media Awards judge. You are charged with selecting 10 products from the Show's New Products Showcase that you believe will resonate best in the Swedish market. Can you talk about the type of products you typically select each year?*

CLW: I'm supposed to select items that I believe should be successful if sold in Sweden. As a do-it-yourselfer, I have therefore chosen new smart tools that should be of great help to the user.

SN: *In this age of electric vehicles and computerized vehicles, do you see the Swedish classic-car hobby continuing into the future?*

CLW: The Swedish classic-car scene is in many ways similar to the U.S. one. We even have the same worries, such as whether our hobby will live on to the next generation(s). We do believe so,

but we would in the same breath like to see more young people in this wonderful hobby.

This is a universal question. I myself believe that the young kids are coming. When they grow older, their focus will change and they will probably love the simplicity of the cars from the '50s and back.

Upcoming SEMA Nordic Business Development Trip

SEMA is organizing the inaugural SEMA Nordic trip, which is scheduled for Stockholm, Sweden, in August–September 2021. Participants can learn the potential for their products in this performance and classic-car paradise. Meet with top trade buyers who enable enthusiasts there to restore and upgrade American classic cars through the half-century-old craze in Sweden and the surrounding countries of Norway, Finland and Denmark.

Performance enhancements are among the top upgrades sought for a range of vehicles. After all, the region is the headquarters of the European drag-racing championship as well as performance for street use, circuit racing, rally racing and drifting. High disposable incomes coupled with a passion for personalization make this a very attractive region. Explore the region with SEMA.

SEMA business development programs are low-cost, turnkey events that bring together SEMA-member manufacturers and buyers from key markets. The price of the trip includes hotels, a tabletop display, meals, and networking events.

For more information, visit www.sema.org/nordic or contact Linda Spencer at lindas@sema.org.