

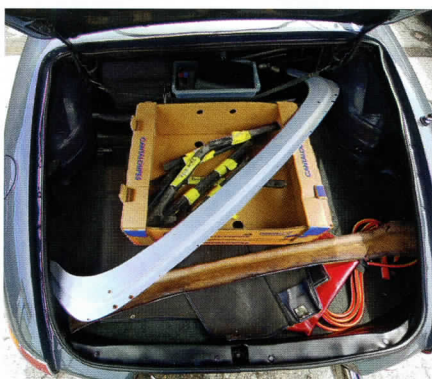
The Duetto Hardtop Project

By Gary Venable

I met Steve and Diana Thomas 17 years ago at my first trip to the annual Tutto Italiano, held at the Larz Anderson Museum in Brookline, Massachusetts. The Thomases arrived in their beautiful red 1969 Spider, replete with Cromodora wheels and highly polished engine bay. I was impressed.

Steve introduced himself and Diana (I was a relatively new Alfa Owners of New England [AONE] member), and then said he had just remarked to Diana, “Looks like we have competition.” I thought that nice of him to say, but really didn’t believe it. Turns out he was right and he was the first to congratulate me when I received an award ... and I was hooked. My Duetto at that time had about 220,000 miles on the clock. I now estimate the car’s mileage is over 330,000 miles (two broken speedo cables and one broken speedo accounting for the guess).

In November 2019, I received a call



All the parts that I needed to refurbish.



from Steve. He told me they were moving to Maine, had a hardtop that was never used, and thought of me first. Would I be interested?

Yes! I had never seen a factory hardtop for the ’66-’69 in person – only a picture in one of my many Alfa books, and from that picture it looked somewhat misplaced. At one time, I had a Parrish Plastics hardtop, which I felt with its rounded shape didn’t look half bad. But after I had the car restored in 1985, I discovered the top was jiggling and had scored my new paint job, so off it came, never to be installed again. (I later sold it for \$150.)

Steve and I decided on a pick-up date and I figured out that it could be transported on the roof of my 2006 Chevy HHR. The 170-mile trip to Steve’s was uneventful, but I noticed that instead of the temperature getting warmer during the day it was in fact getting colder! I thought to myself, “They are moving to Maine. New Hampshire isn’t cold enough?”

Back home, I went to my body shop man – Joe Donato of East Coast Collision in Warwick, Rhode Island. Joe was all smiles when I showed him what I hoped would be a project he would take an interest in. He said, “I consider it an honor.” I then outlined what I envisioned: repair and smooth the top, and painting it the same Graphite Gray as the body. Joe enquired, “What are you

thinking for a headliner?” I said that I’d have that done by my upholstery man, Ray Tkacs in East Providence, Rhode Island, who has done all my work for over 40 years.

My wife and I were heading for Florida, so I asked him to work on it when he could, and I’d be back at the end of May. In the interim, I contacted my pal in Sicily, Carmelo, owner of several award-winning Alfas, including his beloved white-over-red Duetto. I was introduced to Carmelo through the Duetto Register, who had seen my car listed under “Duetto Colours”. He was building a 1/8-scale model and wanted to do it in my car’s color scheme of graphite gray over burgundy, which when completed was featured in the old *Hemmings’ Sports and Exotics*. Carmelo had said that he wanted his model to be different and that he had never seen a gray Duetto. He then added, “Italians hate gray cars”.

I was not surprised when I sent Carmelo a picture of my hardtop project that his comment was: “Why would you want to spoil the lines of the lovely Duetto with that ugly hardtop?” He then added, “If you do this, you must know that all of these hardtops are the same: black”. Nevertheless I told him that this was not such a deviation from originality and it was going to be done in gray.

Over the winter, I learned from Joe that none of the rubber gaskets were salvageable. I contacted Carmelo and he



The hardtop arrives at the body shop.

informed me that much of what I needed was available in Italy, so I ordered them and had them shipped to Joe.

When I returned at the end of May, not a lot had taken place, which was understandable due to COVID and Joe having to work with a skeleton crew. I took the scratched stainless trim and the broken plastic interior pieces home to refurbish them in my garage. I cleaned, glued with Gorilla Glue, sanded, and painted with Krylon black plastic paint. The windows were also removed and, unlike my Parrish Plastics hardtop of years ago, these were safety glass, not Plexiglas, which added to the heft of factory top.

The top was now devoid of everything and had received a coat of light gray primer. Jimmy and Scott of East Coast secured the top to the Duetto, and off I went to see Ray Tkacs to have the headliner installed. At first Ray and I talked about gray or burgundy fabric, but then I suggested pleated vinyl to match the seats, which is what he did. After having the headliner installed, it was back to see Joe, who marveled at Ray's workmanship, saying, "How did he do that?" "Carefully," was my reply.

The final painting and fitment was next, and then, as they say in the car shows, "the big reveal". The top has the same latches as the convertible for the



Skinning the top: Joe Donato, owner of East Coast Collision in Warwick, RI, the man who first restored my Duetto in 1985.

windshield and locks into the windshield frame; the rear attaches to the chrome straps behind the convertible used for the factory boot cover.

I noticed some rattling on my trip home, and discovered that one of the latches had come unhinged. I felt there was something missing on the leading edge of the top ... like a gasket, maybe? I went back to the body shop, we took off the top and, sure enough, there was no gasket, but none was provided by the vendor in Italy. However, I had a pretty good idea of what would work in my garage. The next day, I returned to the shop and within 15 minutes Scotty and Jimmy had the top off, gasket in place, and the top back on. Off I went with no rattling, and the latches stayed firm.

The following day, my middle daughter, Colleen, was home for the weekend. She lives in Marina Bay, Quincy, Massachusetts, and drives a Verde Fiat 500 Sport, five-speed, called Enzo. As I like to say, I have her trained. The Audrain Auto Museum was having one of its Cars and Coffee events, this time at Fort Adams, Newport. I was fortunate to have received an email and responded to a modern day version of "Beat the Clock". Only 100 cars are allowed, it and the roster filled up in



Hardtop on, the car rolls out of body shop.

seven minutes.

The museum is on Bellevue Ave., the Bellevue Ave. that has all the historic mansions, the Tennis Hall of Fame, and now the Audrain Museum, whose logo is a 1939 Alfa Romeo 2900 coupe. Cars and Coffee runs from 8 AM to 10 AM and Colleen was happy to accompany me. We drove in and were motioned by a gentleman in a red jacket and baseball cap to drive a little further. I parked, got out of the car, and noticed that the gentleman doing the directing was not only wearing a facemask but also a bow tie. I exclaimed, "Are you who I think you are?" He replied, "I am."

It was Donald Osborne of "Jay Leno's Garage". He engaged us in a 15-minute conversation in which he demonstrated his knowledge of the Duetto, liked the originality of the car and especially its hardtop. Then he said, "I would like you to be part of the museum's Tour d'Elegance, taking place the first weekend of October." The tour would start at Scarborough Beach, and end at Fort Adams around noon, covering about 67 miles through scenic Rhode Island. Excited? You betcha!

The 6 AM start time required us to leave our residence in Portsmouth at 5:15 AM. As I often say: You cannot stay in Rhode Island for an hour; in any direction you choose you'll be in

Connecticut or Massachusetts before you realize you are no longer in the littlest state with the biggest name. Forty-five minutes is a long trip for Rhode Islanders.

When we arrived, it was dark! Thank goodness for GPS. There was a double line of maybe 50 cars in place. Ahead was a black 1948 Porsche 356 ... to our left was a 1952 Jaguar FHC. All down the line, we saw no commonplace vehicles; nary a tri-five Chevy or Ford, only the rare and unusual. The lead car was the museum's centerpiece: the 1939 Alfa Romeo 2900 Coupe driven by none other than Jay Leno! Later Jay stopped by my gray Duetto and remarked, "Like the hardtop." I said, "May I take a picture of you and my daughter and the car?" He said, "Your 'daughter'; that's what they all say ..." Then I proceeded to have trouble figuring out Colleen's camera, but we got the picture as he continued saying things like, "Come on, Dad, get with the program."

At around 7 AM, the parade started and 58 cars took off, most under their own power. What was amazing was the people along the entire stretch who were out on the sidewalks or pulled over in their cars to take pictures. A lot of waves and honking took place as permanent grins donned our faces.

After we arrived at our final destination, we had a better chance to look over the many varied makes, and we realized how special this day was. I think Alfa was the most prevalent marque, as there was the 2900, two gorgeous Giulia coupes and my Duetto.

I sent Carmelo pictures of the day and he had two comments: "I don't know this guy Jay Leno — I only know Wayne Carini." And about the hardtop: "It's beautiful! Why didn't Alfa think of that?"



Gary and Donald discuss the Duetto.



The hardtop was fashioned to match the burgundy pleated interior. Nice touch!



Jay Leno poses with the author's daughter, Colleen.