Tribute to Phil Hill

The 50th Anniversary of Phil Hill's Formula 1 World Drivers’ Championship was celebrated at the Petersen Automotive Museum in a gathering of motorsport greats.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIAM EDGAR

Philip Toll Hill, Jr., known to English-speaking friends and admirers, legions of them, as simply "Phil"—"Pheel Heel" to European enthusiasts who embraced the quiet American—grew up a postmaster's mechanically-fixated son in tranquil Santa Monica, California, to later win at the top for motor racing autocrat Enzo Ferrari.

When Hill died at 81 in August 2008 he left a legacy of extraordinary proportion. Who could be better at the wheel, smarter in feedback, more versatile in everything that motor racing demands? Who could love life as intensely, appreciate the arts with greater acuity, care more for others? In a word, Phil Hill was astonishing.

On November 10th last year I went to the Petersen Museum knowing the tribute to this man—America's first to earn an F1 crown half a century ago—would be nothing short of magical. Over 400 guests ranged from those who knew him no more than casually to the closeness of fellow motor racing legends such as Dan Gurney, Jim Hall, Parnelli Jones. Carroll Shelby, ill at home, spoke his praise in video. By telephone, Sam Posey attested Phil "could jump into anything and make it go fast." Ferrari chairman Luca di Montezemolo’s admiration arrived in a letter read by Vanessa Hill, Phil's daughter. Alma, his wife for 37 years, would tell endearing stories of her husband. Phil's son, Derek, saying he felt his father's presence that night, would preview the documentary film he's making about his father.

In the Grand Salon, Petersen Museum director Buddy Pepp and Checkered Flag 200's leader Bruce Meyer greeted guests. Emcees Bill Stephens and John Lamm were going over program notes with Tom McIntyre, chairman of the Petersen's tributes, who suggested this one, the 13th, was "probably the most exciting evening we've had."

Jay Leno, who hosted Phil's 80th birthday party in 2007, would be asked to speak and, of course, would. Across from buffet tables and bar, The Auto
Gallery-sponsored “Phil Hill: The Life of a Legend” displayed memorabilia and automobiles the Hill family assembled to depict his life in motorsport—splendid classics Phil restored and won with at Pebble Beach, and racing cars he competed in during the 1950s and '60s.

As the crowd grew, the Museum rang with conversations of Phil the driver, gentleman, scholar and tinkerer, the American phenom who'd survived to win treacherous Grand Prix and long-distance races abroad and, at home, renovate old clocks and player pianos. A chronic inquisitor questioning all and solving the enigmatic, he was a lifelong aficionado who spoke Italian, loved opera, and went out of his way, always, to encourage and help and advise teammates and competitors alike. All this, and his spirit, packed the room that night. Phil's widow said to me, "This is a memory evening of my wonderful, wonderful husband—and what is so exciting about it is that he seems to be as alive in his passing as he was alive during his time here."

"This is all about friends!" enthused Meyer. Hill's sports car pal from way back, Cy Yedor, recalled, "He led me around and was always available." "If anyone stood for class in road racing," insisted Rex McAfee, Jack's son, "it was Phil Hill." Pete Vanlaw, who witnessed Hill win Torrey Pines with his first Ferrari, gasped, "It was astounding!" Bill Krause called him "a gentleman we all looked up to as a person.
not just a driver.” Prominent restorer Paul Russell, referring to Phil and Phil’s restoration partner, Ken Vaughn, admitted, “Theirs was the iconic shop we always wanted to emulate.” Author Tim Considine called the evening “a long-overdue tribute to one of the great heroes of motorsport.” Dan Gurney, among Phil’s closest friends, said, “I don’t see many young people here, but a lot of us have big smiles and are having a good time.” Parnelli Jones added, “I’m just proud to be here.” For my part, I knew firsthand Phil’s genius.

Jim Hall, for whom Hill drove the radical Chaparral and won at Brands Hatch in 1967—Hill’s last professional race—recalled, “When Phil agreed to work with us it was a real boon because we had not done international racing with our cars and I knew we needed somebody who, number one, knew what they were doing and, number two, was smart enough to talk about it.” Offered Bobby Rahal, “Growing up in the ’60s I was into Formula 1 and sports car racing, and Phil was the titan, he was the man.” Said John Morton, “When I saw Phil win the Road America 500 in ’57, I decided to be a race driver.” Morton then quipped, “In other words, he ruined my life!”

Hill’s perennial colleague, John Lamm, moderated both sincere and amusing comments from a highligt panel of honored guests—Gurney, Hall and Jones, joined by master photographer Jesse Alexander and writer Denise McCluggage, who defined Hill to a T. “There was something about Phil that couldn’t stand success,” Denise told the room about that very private place from which he could win races and be World Champion. “He would contrive a way,” she remarked, “to make himself an underdog.”

Speaking to the tribute’s capacity audience, Leno offered his own resonate take on the real Phil Hill. “He was like a Packard mechanic,” Jay said off-mike, “who just happened to be one of the greatest race car drivers in the world.”