

The SL and Me - Special Feature

Oh, to be 14 years old and powersliding an original Gullwing around the family farm!

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I first spotted the SL in a local showroom where they often had exotic cars on display. It was 1958, the SL was four, and I was 14. I wanted it desperately. I was fanatical about becoming a racing driver, and here was a connection with Mercedes-Benz and all the mythology surrounding its invincible racing team. In my fevered brain, I saw ownership of the SL conferring some of the Mercedes legend on me.

The convertible SLs were just coming out—with real doors—and the Gullwing was yesterday's news, for sale at \$2500. I couldn't buy it without my mother's blessing and, of course, there was the matter of having to borrow the money. She was hesitant. She grasped what a bargain it was but worried that a Mercedes-Benz 300 SL was too ostentatious for a young kid still in high school. She wasn't concerned by how fast it was—on a test drive along an unpatrolled back road with her on board, I took it up to 120, and she could see I was right at home. We lived on a farm, and with her encouragement, I had been driving for years in an assortment of farm vehicles and a '49 Ford. I was only 14, with two years to go before I could get my license, but she understood that we were talking about something other than basic transportation. All she had to go on were intangibles, so she came up with one of her own: She said that my father, who had been killed in WWII, would have let me have it if he was alive, that he had a kind of go-for-it attitude. So, on the biggest day of my life, the SL became mine.

Getting into it called for a specific sequence of movements. First, you sat on the broad, red-leather sill. (The sills concealed the small-diameter tubes of the lightweight space-frame chassis. For torsional rigidity, the frame needed to occupy the space where a door would ordinarily have been, which left the designers no choice but to have the doors swing up.) Next, you released the catch on the hinged steering wheel (pivoting the bottom of the wheel forward) and swung your legs in. Then you dropped into the bucket seat. Finally, you reached up for the door handle and pulled the door down. Thunk.

Eye-eee—fuel pump on. Choke—pulled out. Then turn the absurdly small key, which looked too small to unlock a briefcase. I'd head for the fields and farm roads. For weeks that first summer, I practiced my heel-and-toe technique. I tore up fields as I learned to drift, stopping now and then to clear the alfalfa out of the radiator. There were several blind turns around the barns, and I was lucky that I never encountered a Farmall tractor coming the other way.

Occasionally I'd go for a late-night run on public roads. Magazines had touted the SL as being good for 160 mph, but the most I ever saw was 145...with the car hard to hold in a straight line along the uneven crown of the road. But what the SL did was less important to me than how I reacted. Did I have the right stuff? I was convinced I did, and I ached to prove it in races.

I was an avid student of the sport and knew that the Gullwings had earned themselves a place in history through their racing successes, which included victories at Le Mans and the Carrera Panamericana. But it was the SL's 1000 miles on the roads of Italy during the 1955 Mille Miglia that meant the most to me. In the same race that Stirling Moss drove a Mercedes-Benz SLR to victory, John Fitch was having the drive of his life, bringing a stock 300 SL home 5th overall and winning the GT class. And John Fitch was a neighbor. Although he lived just 10 miles away, I'd never had the nerve to try to meet him. But owning the SL made things different, emboldening me to ask him for a lesson.

He agreed, and we met at Lime Rock. I viewed the lesson as merely a pretext to tear around the track showing the great John Fitch what I could do. When I arrived, I saw that he had used some cones to lay out a slalom course on the main straight. A slalom! That wasn't what I had in mind at all. He took the car for a run through the cones. "This won't work," he said, raising the door. "Your shocks are shot." The miles in the fields had pounded them to mush. But he let me make a few laps of the track, and something convinced him how serious I was about racing. After that, he became—and still is—a sort of informal mentor.

A couple of years later, I was old enough, at last, to begin racing. In a sense, at that moment the SL's mission was accomplished: It had been a physical embodiment of my desire to race, then a tool for learning some of the mechanics of driving fast, finally a connection to John Fitch. I might have considered selling it, but the beauty of living on a farm is that space can always be found somewhere. Once I was racing full time, the SL sat up on blocks in one of the barns.

The next time I remember driving it was in June 1971, on a rare weekend home between races. Tony Adamowicz and I had just finished 3rd at Le Mans in a NART Ferrari, I was

dumbfounding David Hobbs with my speed in F5000, and I was in love with Ellen, my wife to be. In short, life was good. Jim Haynes, the general manager of Lime Rock and one of the earliest exponents of vintage racing, suggested we attend the hillclimb at Mt. Equinox, Vermont. My mom liked the idea and said she'd go, so down off the blocks came the SL, and up we went to Vermont.

We had rooms in the hotel at the top of the mountain, and Jim met us for supper. "Everything's set," he said, and he told me what class I was in and who the opposition was. The opposition! I had been thinking of the event as a demonstration, a tour up the hill, not a race. I had never raced the SL, and I couldn't settle for less than John Fitch would—winning. "I need to learn the course," I said to Jim, but then I realized I didn't have enough gas.

"Here," Jim said, handing me some keys. "My 240Z has a full tank." In the dark, I made five or six runs up the mountain, trying to identify the critical sections. In the morning, I drove the SL down the mountain to the starting line. The early SLs, like mine, have a notorious swing-axle rear suspension that calls for a delicate touch, especially in fast corners. But Mt. Equinox was mostly hairpins, and to get through them I planned to downshift into 2nd, turn, let the rear end get loose, floor it at the apex, and exit in a smooth slide and a crowd-pleasing touch of opposite lock. By pure chance the gearing for the straights was perfect—it was as if the car had been designed expressly for Mt. Equinox. We won our class. The trophy: four glass goblets hand painted with pictures of geese, whose outstretched wings echoed the doors of the car.

SLs were mentioned in almost everyone's list of the top 10 cars they'd like to own, and in the early 1970s they began to creep up in value. At first, I paid no attention; I thought it was a passing fad. To me, our car's real value was sentimental. When my son John was born in 1982, my wife Ellen and I brought him home from the hospital in it—his first ride. We soon found out that a sure-fire way to get him to sleep was to take him out in the car, so the SL saw plenty of action that summer, rumbling along back roads in the heat and darkness.

The car was aging. One winter, mice built a home in the engine bay. The rubber seals around the windows began to crack. The headliner sagged. But the magic was still there. The body shape, designed by engineers, had remained fresh and original through several generations. Its history, how it was built as a statement by Mercedes to show that the company was rising from the ashes of the war, demanded respect. I asked Bob Akin to do a modest restoration, and he in turn took some of the vitals to Paul Russell, the best 300 SL restorer in the business. So the SL visited the Fountain of Youth and came back looking much the same but acting with an assurance I had forgotten it had.

Shortly after its return, someone offered me the kind of money it takes to buy a house. I had promised the car to John and had no intention of selling it, but that offer, and the numbers floating around at the auctions, made me see the car in a different light. Obviously, the days of storming through the fields were over. And...gotta check that insurance. Showing the car to visitors brought expressions of reverence. A friend, Don

Breslauer, asked if he could do regular maintenance, as if the SL had become an elderly gentleman who needed someone to keep his shoes polished.

A few days ago, John took me out for a ride, and I realized I had never been a passenger in the car. He drove with the same verve and confidence that I had when my mom and I took it for that test drive so long ago. It was a day in early fall, with the light coming in low and turning the trees into lanterns of gold and amber. In the car, the red leather glowed and the headliner was the color of wheat. Shadows flickered across the long hood. Amid all the sound and fury of the shifting, I realized the SL, which in its day was the fastest production car in the world, a car the road testers described as having “neck-snapping acceleration” is, by modern standards, slow. Its inline-6 puts out 190 bhp at 6000 rpm. Zero to 60 is about 7.2 seconds—performance on a par with dozens of mid-price imports.

It’s over 50 years old; of course, we expect newer cars to have more raw performance just as we expect today’s athletes to set new records. But there’s a subjective area measured in emotion and significance, and here the SL stands out as a great car—not only of its time, but of today—and tomorrow. Masterpieces happen. Vitruvius would have said it had Firmness, Commodity, Delight...and gullwing doors.

As John and I rode along the other day, we wanted to go on forever, maybe even for 1000 miles.