

Reprinted from *Connoisseur*  
Nov. 1985 with permission  
from Stephan Wilkinson

## GURU OF THE GULLWING

**P**aul Russell is a thirty-four-year-old onetime engineering student who has become a specialist in foreign autos. Indeed, he has given new meaning to the word *specialization*. In his world-famous shop, Gullwing Service, in Essex, Massachusetts, he mostly services, repairs, and restores not only one make of foreign car but one specific model: the Mercedes-Benz 300SL.

Russell's is a worthy trade, for the 300SL is a landmark automobile, a rare combination of road-wrinkling power, technological innovation, and beauty. About 3,200 were made, between 1954 and 1963, and only 2,400 or so survive; but the 300SL nonetheless looms large in automotive history—particularly the original coupe version, with the upward-opening doors, which gave it the name "Gullwing." In no sense the styling trick they have since become on lesser imitators, the 300SL coupe's distinctive but inconvenient doors were the only solution possible in a superlight—hence "SL"—tubular frame that required steel tubing smack where a door would normally be.

There were other fast cars in the fifties, especially from Italy (Ferraris, Maseratis) and England (Jaguars, Aston Martins), but none was so victorious in competition as the 300SLs. Perhaps even more extraordinary were the production versions, sold to the public. In those, Mercedes-Benz combined the power and refinement of the racers with docility and reliability, making the 300SL the world's first two-seat performance car that could be driven like a sedan and treated like a truck.

Today, a restored Gullwing is worth at least \$100,000, and some sixty of them—that's over \$6,000,000 worth—have been brought back to prime condition by Gullwing Service during the last seven years. The fashion designer Ralph Lauren, a car collector with excellent taste and deep pockets, recently had a 300SL coupe restored by Gullwing. Lauren spent hours assessing state-of-the-art paint chips with Russell until they found the perfect tint—a subtle silver with a hint of bronze—and had the entire interior of the car, includ-



Paul Russell likes fixing one Mercedes-Benz best of all: the kind with wings.

ing the floor and the transmission tunnel, done in the finest saddle-tone leather. And because Lauren wanted whizbang acceleration and speed, Gullwing Service installed a modern Mercedes-Benz five-speed transmission in the car, but in a way that left the original appearance intact.

Although most of their work is done on 300SLs, Russell and his crew of five mechanics, three body restorers, one interior-trimming specialist, and a parts manager (the shop has a Telex link to all its German

suppliers) also rebuild and service postwar Mercedes-Benz sedans and convertibles. Russell functions as an investment adviser and broker for those who want a postwar Mercedes-Benz. And he's got so much extra room in his hangar of a shop that he has begun accepting commissions for work on more limited-production Mercedes-Benzes, but the guru draws the line with Mercedes owners who ask if he can install Gullwing doors on their contemporary cars.  
—Stephan Wilkinson

# Gullwing

Service Company Incorporated

106 Western Avenue, PO Box 954, Essex Massachusetts 01929 617 768 6919