

M QUALITY

REMAKING RARETIES FOR THE FAST LANE

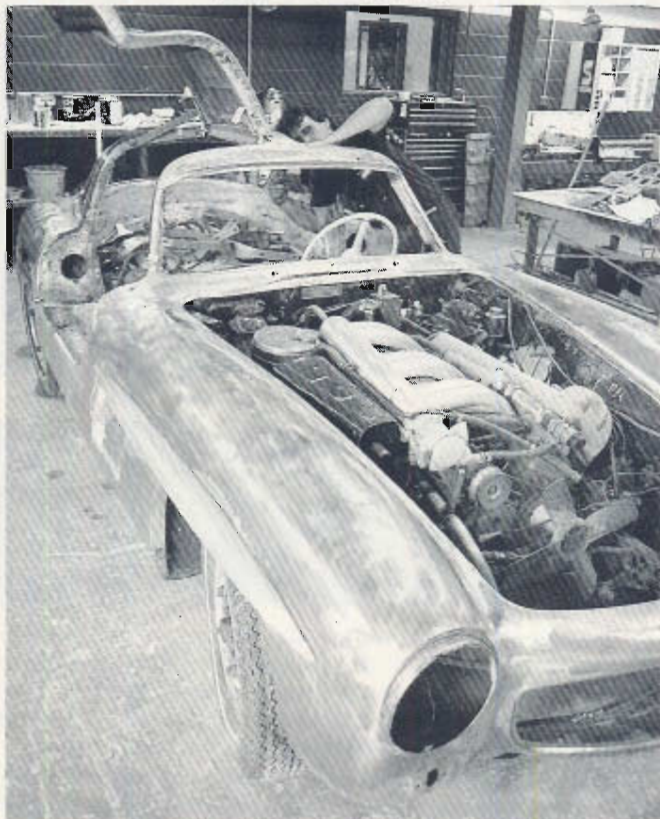
To me, it's not the absolute speed," Paul Russell says thoughtfully, as he goads a Mercedes Gullwing coupe past 90 miles an hour on a rain-licked stretch of highway near Essex, Massachusetts. "It's the total package. Does the car drive like a Mercedes? Does it feel like a Mercedes? Is it tight and responsive?" That the car is fast enough to own the passing lane is a given, surging toward 100, the tachometer nowhere near the red line. Russell's words compete with the rugged engine throb, his voice artfully nonchalant: "To me, driving a Gullwing at 120 miles an hour is relaxing."

Particularly when that Gullwing—the limited production Mercedes 300SL coupe known for its distinctive spread-wing doors—has issued from Russell's own Gullwing Services, the nearby facility where he supervises the restoration and maintenance of the Gullwing and its S series siblings, the 300SL roadster and the 300S cabriolet.

Mercedes produced fewer than 4,000 of the vehicles between 1954 and 1963, and yet Russell has never wanted for work, shepherding as many as 35 cars at one time in his 15,000-square-foot workshop. His obsessive quest for perfection—in which an engine knock becomes a nemesis, a cabin



Restorer Paul Russell at the wheel of a totally restored Mercedes 300SL—the Gullwing



Stripped to shell, a Mercedes 300SL in the initial stages of restoration

squeak a scourge—has won him an international clientele, who will routinely wait as long as a year and pay upwards of \$100,000 for a total restoration.

Look for a Teutonic drill-master among the staff of 16 at Gullwing and he's nowhere to be found—only the companionable, soft-spoken, 35-year-old Russell, who runs a meticulous but easy-going shop. As he speaks,

though, he reveals the persona that once led him to assert that "we put the interests of the car ahead of the interests of the owner."

In the case of a rare aluminum Gullwing, Russell's standards of authenticity were on the line. "At that time, we were not able to get the original seat fabric," he says, as if the checkerboard pattern were as vital as the overhead cam. "The car had

some old vinyl seat covers made and stitched right over the original seats. We had to take what remained of the seat material and take the yarn apart and find out what the weave was." The yarns were then scrupulously matched and the new fabric woven on a handloom, an expense the owner manfully accepted. Justifying the search, Russell says, "It was an aluminum Gullwing, one of only 29 made. We did look for fabric to match, and some were close. But close wasn't good enough."

Close is never good enough for the self-described perfectionist, who is making a life's work of tuning, timing, transforming and trading some of the 1,400 Gullwings, built from 1954 to 1957, the 1,800 roadsters that superseded them, and the 750-odd cabriolets that still exist. Russell's reasons for limiting himself almost exclusively to the S series pour forth as fluidly as motor oil. "These are hand-assembled cars," he says, eyeing the graceful lines and aristocratic snout of a cabriolet. "The engineering is superb, and the fuel injection system was well ahead of its time. I had a client call me recently to say that he's been getting mileage in the 20s (per gallon.)" Opening the door is a short course in painstaking detail, as he points to the Honduras mahogany anchoring the gauges and the tiny leather patches that keep the trim wood from rubbing against the door frame—the source of potentially odious squeaks—and indicates the same behind the instrument panel. A long Landau arm—an ornament—accents the contours of a cabriolet's soft canvas roof, which is layered and insulated with quilted muslin bags of padding, and then lined so that no inner ribs should distract the driver and passengers.

Russell's shop would race the heart of the classic

Mercedes lover, with automobiles in every state of repair strewn around the floor: two Gullwings, two roadsters, a cabriolet on a sled and the shell of a Gullwing in the access. In an adjacent storage area, a small horde of Mercedes are parked in tight formation. Neatly T-shirted personnel, divided between mechanical and body work, are surprisingly free of grease and paint; the shop is clean but not austere, smoothly functional but not surgical.

A total restoration, which will push the value of a Gullwing to \$125,000 and higher, begins with a week-long diagnostic exam, which allows Russell to project both the expense and a schedule of work. A crew chief is appointed, typically the mechanic who takes care of the major drive train components and the major reassembly, and who immediately begins to requisition the necessary parts. The car is completely disassembled and stripped, in some cases to a tubular, skeletal chassis of antique appearance.

Gullwing maintains an extensive inventory of the parts required for S series vehicles. "It's amazing how well they support their 30-year-old cars," Russell says warmly of the parent company. "We can buy everything we need from Mercedes for the engine, although we are starting to see the end of the line on the little things." Occasionally, when no parts can be located, Gullwing will re-manufacture them, from chrome trim and dash switches to whole fenders.

While body work takes place, the drive train and mechanical systems are segregated and overhauled as necessary—"as much as we can without having a complete car," Russell says. Partial reassembly follows, when the phoenix-like vehicle regains its engine, suspension and brakes, and "we try to make a running car out of it." Still

without an interior, the Mercedes undergoes extensive sessions with the trimmer, who restores the interior fittings.

The perquisite, of course, is the test-driving—Russell and his staff will log as many

muscular Gullwing, which, with 240 horsepower in its three-liter engine, apologizes to few other cars on the road. "It's almost an emotional decision of what really appeals to them." Neither is he interested in producing show cars,

where it could be properly adjusted.

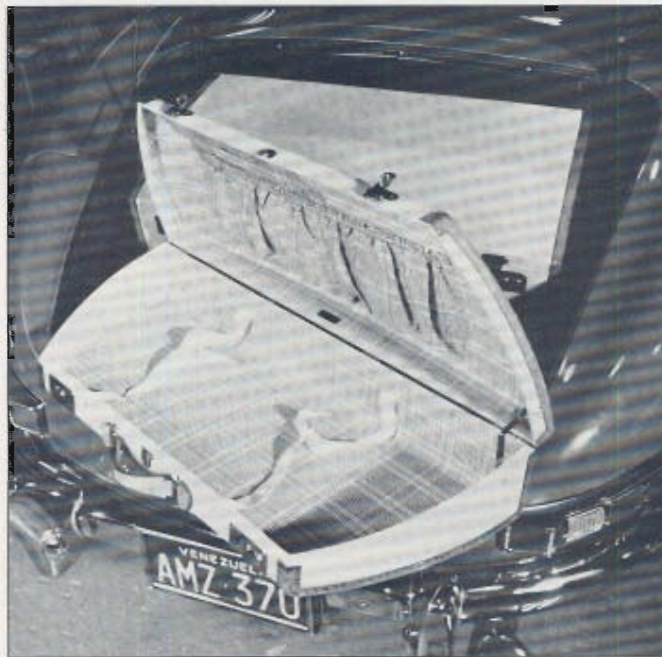
As a youth, drawn to automobiles, Russell was taken under the wing of a master Mercedes mechanic while working a summer job. He was frequently in the shop until 2 a.m., despite being a salaried, not hourly, employee. "I was so excited about it, I figured I was getting twice as much experience in the same amount of time," he says. With increasing expertise he worked in imported and sports car garages throughout New England but became disenchanted with what one of his lead mechanics calls "the dealer rat race." Fast turnover was a priority alien to Russell's exacting credo.

In 1978 he bought out his then-employer and started Gullwing, and has since expanded the operation drastically to include every aspect of restoration. With that has come the confidence to cleave to both his standards and his prices. "I come from a family," he says of his upbringing in North Andover, Mass., "where buying a new Dodge '66 station wagon was a big deal. Charging someone \$100,000 or more to restore their car still makes me feel funny."

Russell cautions against the Gullwing as an investment, and points out that, with its steep sale price—\$50,000 and up—and in a cyclical market, the car may only be worth as much as the owner has put into it.

"I'd like a Gullwing," says Russell, who currently drives a 280E sedan. For now, he contents himself with the stewardship of dozens of Gullwings, roadsters and cabriolets, and the few other Mercedes he consents to work on. Each is briefly his to possess, to rejuvenate, to perfect. "Trouble is," he adds with droll regret, "when we finish, the customers want 'em back."

—DUNCAN CHRISTY



Customized luggage: handier than the pedestrian trunk

"Perfectionists are sometimes a pain in the ass," restorer Russell concedes. "Most of the time we're dealing with my dissatisfaction—something the customer may never know."

as 400 miles per car in ruthless pursuit of glitches and imperfections. The roads around Essex, a topography of frost heaves, crumbling shoulders and tight corners, give them ample opportunity to probe "the total package," and purge every other noise but a flawlessly responding engine's.

Billed at a competitive \$42 an hour—some two to three thousand hours of labor will

send a redeemed Mercedes S sleekly toward a date with the fast lane.

"People don't really look at the complexity of the car, or how technically advanced it is," Russell observes of the

immaculate concours specimens whose appeal is purely cosmetic, which he deems derisively "pieces of rolling architecture."

Russell balances his stringencies with the knowledge that "perfectionists are sometimes a pain in the ass. Most of the time we're not dealing with an unhappy customer—we're dealing with my dissatisfaction, which is something the cus-

tomers may never know." When a Gullwing, which Russell had reluctantly released ahead of schedule to its importunate Texan owner, fouled its injectors, he paid to have it trucked back to Essex

