

CRAFTSMANSHIP LIVES:

The fine art of automobile restoration demands ingenuity, resourcefulness, high technical skill, and a feeling for machinery not too far removed from love.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHAN WILKINSON



RESTORER PAUL RUSSELL



Call Central Casting to order the cliché restorer of classic cars and you'll get an irascible old craftsman in a leather apron, a half-century's worth of punch-press scars and bearing-grease tracks in the wrinkles of his hands, and an arsenal of eccentricities to wield upon the customers who come to worship at his altar.

You might also get 31-year-old Paul Russell to play the part of the venerable sorcerer's boy apprentice, but the fact is that Russell—a young man with serious eyes, a mustache as

precise as his words and a face that smiles fully but infrequently—may be the country's premier rebuilder of 1950s and early 1960s milestone Mercedes automobiles, especially the awesome 300 SL coupes and roadsters.

Russell's only eccentricity seems to be an inordinate fascination with a tiny group of cars built while he was in short pants. And while his contemporaries were bolting fat tires onto their pickup trucks and turbochargers into their Toyotas, he was busy establishing the Gullwing Service Company—a Topsfield, Massachusetts, firm that since 1978 has done nothing but restore and service barely one decade's worth of special cars from a single manufacturer. Bring Paul Russell your Ferrari and he'll be delighted to drive it around the block, but he won't work on it. Ask him to restore your Rolls and he'll turn you away. Tell him your 450 SLC needs an ace tuner's touch and he'll direct you to the nearest Mercedes dealer.

But show him the bulge of a Mercedes-Benz 300 d's fender or the thrust of a 300 Sc cabriolet's nose, the swelling excesses of a Gullwing's tight little body or a 170's restraint, and Paul Russell will clear his desk, turn those piercing eyes on you and set about deciding if you are "a qualified customer."

Qualifying has something to do with whether you can afford the enormous expense of a total restoration, of course—\$70,000 to \$90,000 is typical—but more with whether you understand and accept what the restoration process might involve. Russell refuses to economize in any way that will affect the quality of Gullwing Service's work. Not every customer needs a total rebuild—"We'll be happy to do a brake job, as long as we can do it in the same manner in which we do a restoration," he says—but no Mercedes is allowed to leave his shop with faults in one area that will affect the quality of the work he and his four mechanics and one trimmer have done in another. "That attitude may come across as arrogant," this gentle young man admits, "but we look after the best interests of the automobile over those of the owner."

Opposite page: Paul Russell and some recent projects. The 300 Sc cabriolet in the background has been completely restored for a customer in Brazil. The 300 SL roadster at left is being stripped, prior to a full restoration.

Left: Inside the workshop.

Below: This small plaque is fitted to each Russell restoration.



CRAFTSMANSHIP LIVES: PAUL RUSSELL



Russell's customers nevertheless come from afar, and though a local 300SL roadster may be in for tuning, there will also be a cabriolet with Venezuelan plates sitting in the next bay and a Texas Gullwing stripped to its tube-frame skeleton in the slot beyond that. (The shop can handle three simultaneous restorations, with a highly experienced crew chief assigned to each and Russell overseeing the lot.)

"The best advertising is word of mouth," Russell says. "When people take cars out of here, they don't put them in their pocket. Everybody sees them and wants to know where they were done." Several of Gullwing's finest restorations have gone to Texas, including a remarkable aluminum-bodied 300 SL coupe—one of only 33 built—and he has one frequent customer from Guatemala, another who lives in Brazil. This can make life difficult: Russell knows 1950s Mercedes so well that he can usually diagnose mechanical ailments by telephone, but when one of his Texas restorations stopped dead awhile ago, he paid to have it trucked back to Topsfield to overhaul the crucial fuel-injection pump.

It also means the restoration process involves complete documentation. Twenty pages of paperwork on a blueprinted engine block alone is not unusual, and Russell photographs every stage of work for absentee owners and communicates with them constantly. Though there's not a single KEEP OUT sign in the shop, Paul says, "Few of our customers appreciate the amount of work that goes into a restoration. They can come in any time and watch us, but most are too busy or too far away."



Above: Paul Russell pilots a 300 SL Roadster; once it's restored, he and his staff will road test a car for as many as 800 miles.

Left: A 300 SL chassis—restored, tightened, tuned and mechanically immaculate—waits to have its refurbished and repainted bodywork remounted.

Bringing a car to Gullwing for restoration is a bit like going to the Mayo Clinic, but the process would also be familiar to anybody who has ever dealt with a building contractor. First, the car undergoes a complete diagnostic examination—the mechanicals, bodywork and trim (which to a restorer means all the soft stuff: upholstery, leatherwork, carpeting, fabrics, convertible top, wood detailing). "Then we put together a game plan for the complete restoration and try to explain to the customer what *we* think it's going to cost. The best estimate I can give is to show them exactly what it cost another client with the same car in similar condition, but it's hard to get people to understand the ramifications of the restoration process—that you can't simply stop here and not bother with that over there or cut a corner somewhere else. I've had to abandon several projects in which the owners wouldn't believe my estimate and then couldn't afford it when I turned out to be right."

If it's a major restoration, Russell asks for a \$10,000 deposit up front and then plots a pattern of monthly payments matched to the cash-flow requirements of the job. His shop rate is \$35 an hour, which seems a bargain compared to the \$50 to \$60 some of the flashier California restoration shops exact. Generally, the speed with which Gullwing's work is done is determined by how quickly the owner can pay for it, and not surprisingly, a total restoration usually takes a year.

However, Russell is currently completing a beige 300 SL roadster for which the client said he'd spring just as fast as Gullwing could spin its wrenches. Though some owners request restoration to the car's nascent condition, which means the overhauling and rebuilding of all serviceable components, this roadster is literally being remanufactured: virtually every mechanical and trim component has been replaced. (The interior is being done in a particularly rich blue leather that exactly matches the car's original furnishings. In order to obtain the exact color and quality that he demanded, the owner had to minimum-order enough leather to do *five* cars.)

Russell has never been asked to do a "show car"—the compulsively restored museum pieces that are trucked to concours solely to compete for trophies—but some of his cars have nonetheless done well in

competition. Last September [1981], the aluminum 300 SL drove off with the Most Desirable Gullwing award at the Gullwing Group's 1981 national convention. Though he's not big on such precious touches as lacquering and buffing the inside of a car's wheel wells, the perfection of Russell's restorations is typified by the fact that in order to exactly reproduce that SL's original and characteristic checkerboard-plaid seat fabric, he had a swatch of what remained of the original cloth (which he found under a leather reupholstery job) separated into its original strands, the color and yarn of each matched precisely and the fabric remanufactured by a mill in Boston. Two other typical Russell touches in that car: \$1,200 worth of new fitted luggage and a handsome bronze knockoff hammer made by Gullwing to duplicate the long-lost original.

Lest one be distracted by such superficialities, Russell cautions that Gullwing Service Company cars must run as well as they look. "I want the owner to be able to get into that car, light it off and drive anywhere in the country, trouble-free," he insists. "What matters to us is how the car *performs*, not just how shiny it is." When Gullwing rebuilds an engine, for example, it is first run for several hours on a special portable test stand, where the basic tuning, tightening and hot-torquing are done. The test-bed then becomes a trailer, and the entire rig is towed to a nearby racing-engine specialist, Astral Engineering, to be run on Astral's dynamometer. There, the basic break-in and more tuning are done under load. Finally, the engine is reinstalled and the car buttoned up, to be driven by Russell and his mechanics for another 500 to 800 miles before finally going home to its owner. As Orson Welles might say, Paul Russell releases no car before its time.

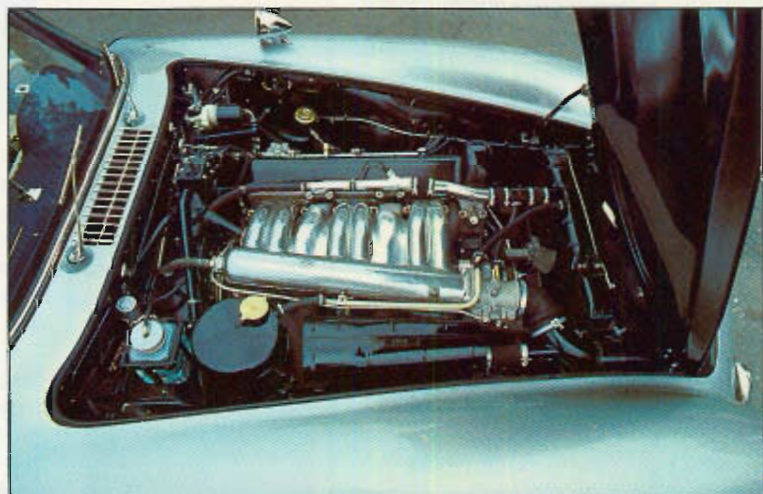
What, one inevitably wonders, does *Russell* drive? An impeccable Gullwing? An inconspicuous but perfect little 170 Diesel? Perhaps that most desirable of all 1950s Mercedes, a 300 Sc cabriolet? "If I had enough money to own one of these cars," he smiles, "I'd invest it in the shop. That blue Datsun pickup is mine."

But that may someday change, for one project Russell would dearly love to undertake is replicating the famous silver 300 SLR race-car transporter—a 300 SL truck, in effect—that the Mercedes-Benz team used in the '50s. Then, Gullwing Service would have a shopwagon to match its reputation.



A 300 SL engine, mounted on a test stand, is tuned and run-in prior to installation in the car. A dynamometer session, and 500 to 800 miles of road testing, will precede the final O.K.

The shop can accommodate three separate restorations simultaneously, and all work is performed under the same singular credo: "We look after the best interests of the automobile," says Paul Russell, "over those of the owner."



PAUL RUSSELL