

# LIFE AND TIMELESSNESS

## 60 Years Mercedes SL 'Pagoda'

From stylist's muse to the toughest of rally stages, the 'Pagoda' Mercedes SL packed a lot of action and glamour into a relatively short eight-year production lifespan.

From a misunderstood roadster that turned out to be a pioneer of a completely new kind of car, the Pagoda SL did so much more for Mercedes-Benz than merely replacing its Fifties roadsters.

So join us as we delve into the story and culture of a car which, in retrospect, created a whole new type of luxury roadster – or at the very least revived it from its long slumber after the art-deco era of the Thirties.

We take an example of a pure, early 230SL on a drive around London's upmarket Mayfair district to experience it in its natural

home, and we look back on all the famous names who bought SLs and, with it, made it the choice for established racing drivers, pop stars, actors and models alike.

But here we relive its story. That of a car with a – separately designed – iconic roof, which charmed America and sired a bloodline that continues to this day while even its best-funded rivals have faltered and failed.

The 300SL and 190SL may have launched the nameplate, but it's arguably been the Pagoda that's gone on to define it – all SLs since have been created to its idiosyncratic template.

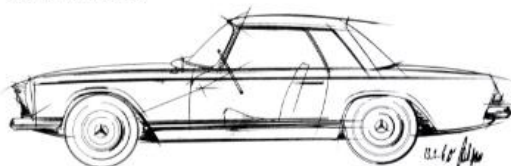


**1956** A plan for a car known initially as the 220SL, a larger-engined replacement for the 190SL based on the 220SE saloon, is hatched by Mercedes. It's given the internal model code W113.

**1957** The 'Pagoda' roof design, intended to build in coupé-like strength and visibility for convertibles as well as providing a platform for a roof rack, is patented for Mercedes by engineer Bela Barényi.



**1959-1960** Mercedes stylist Paul Bracq produces the initial drawings for the W113 project. Despite an early Corvette-influenced sketch, the design process involves gradually evolving the 300SL Gullwing's lines. Bracq designs the car as a coupé, and conventional full-sized doors – as opposed to gullwings – feature from the start.



**1961** Mercedes styling manager Friedrich Geiger finalises the production design, uniting and sharpening Bracq's shape with Barényi's roof design.



**1964** The 230SL's rally success continues, with third on its second Spa-Sofia-Liège. Just two months after the 230SL's launch, Tom Tjaarda of Pininfarina reveals a conventional coupé proposal, which is exhibited at the Paris Auto Salon in October.

**1963** New SL goes into production with a last-minute change to incorporate a new engine. The 2.3-litre straight-six is based on the 220SE's 2.2, but a displacement increase is accompanied by 300SL-style six-pump direct-injection rather than the twin-pump system used on the saloons.

The car is launched in two guises – as a folding-roof convertible, or with a detachable hardtop marketed as a coupé. Eugen Böhringer announces a rally campaign and wins the Spa-Sofia-Liège. Stirling Moss and Juan-Manuel Fangio are presented with new 230SLs by race team boss Rudolf Uhlenhaut.



**1965** After Eugen Böhringer departs for Porsche, Dieter Clemmer and Martin Braungart score a class win for the 230SL on the Acropolis Rally. Beatle John Lennon treats himself to a dark-blue 230SL.



**1966** The 2.5-litre 250SL replaces the 230SL, answering demands for more power. In the end, the 250SL is only sold for one model year – 1967. A single, side-facing rear seat, in place of the fold-down soft top, becomes an option. Audrey Hepburn buys one of the last 230SLs, in white, which features in the SL's most high-profile screen role, seen throughout in *Two For The Road*.



**1967** Considering the power issue, Mercedes chief engineer Erich Waxenberger experiments with a 6.3-litre V8 in a 250SL. Tests at the Nürburgring Nordschleife in July result in a 10m 40s lap time, but reveal high-speed instability. Instead of the 6.3 and responding to impending American emissions regulations which strangle the 250SL's power output, the car is evolved into the 2.8-litre 280SL instead.



**1971** Waxenberger's dream of a V8 SL is achieved with the SL's replacement – the R107-generation 360SL.



# Talk of the Town

Once misunderstood, the **Mercedes 'Pagoda' SL** went on to create and define an entirely new kind of car. Join us on a drive through its natural playground of nocturnal Mayfair as the icon turns 60

Words SAM DAWSON Photography CHARLIE MACEE





'Few classics seem to unite such a cross-section of society in adoring praise quite like this one'



London's Mayfair drips with exclusive upper-class tradition. Outside Claridge's, the footmen wear uniforms more befitting of the iconic hotel's 1856 origins than the present day. It's a world of private security and defensive architecture, where anything unsightly is moved along.

And yet, rather arrogantly perhaps, I've drawn this 1965 Mercedes-Benz 230SL up in a restricted bay outside Claridge's for a rest and a photo opportunity. Neither the men in the grey top hats and tailcoats nor the security staff prowling the streets intervene. They know, deep down, that this is Mercedes SL territory first and foremost. Discretion is exercised.

Not wanting to overstay my apparent welcome, I turn the ignition key. The fuel-injected SL fires up immediately, without fuss or the need to pump or prime anything. A luxury almost unheard of in 1963 when the car was launched, especially in the world of ragtop roadsters. I'm just about to wend the short gear lever through its travel into Drive when a Renault Sport Mégane coupé draws alongside. The absolute antithesis of the SL, it's bright metallic blue with aftermarket graphics stuck to its flanks, lowered on black alloy wheels, its stereo pumping out dance music. Its passenger window drops to reveal a trendy twentysomething whose parents probably weren't even born when the SL was new. 'That is sweet, man!' he shouts. 'So original, just how I'd keep it if it was mine. Beautiful car!' Few classics I've driven seem to unite such a cross-section of society in adoring praise quite like this one.

As his exhaust pops and spits off into the London night, I slide the SL away from the kerb with a firm shove of the tautly-sprung accelerator pedal. Rather than spinning its wheels and yelping, the fuel-injected 2.3-litre straight-six gives off a potent purr, like a cat about to play with its prey, before it squats on its hindquarters, the purr becoming a potent V8-like whoofle in its midrange, then a brief shriek of steely race-bred high-tech, high-rpm exotica before the gearbox shifts upwards, and the engine note drops into near-silence. The hefty torque pull continues, but the car, it seems, has settled down into a new realm of refinement. Kerbside poseur becomes introverted luxury waffer, accepted in a city increasingly dominated by whispering electric saloons. It's as if Mercedes predicted the future.

But then pioneers are so often misunderstood when they're new. It's hard to believe, looking at this Mercedes, so stylish and broadly desired that a dark green one currently features prominently in a TV and billboard advertising campaign, that it was once considered strange-looking and hard to understand.

For all the W113 SL's success in the United States, American magazine *Road & Track* was perhaps the most savage in its analysis of this sylphlike newcomer upon its launch 60 years ago. Reporter Eberhard Seifert, filing his copy from the 1963 Geneva Auto Salon, laid into its looks before any journalist had even got behind the wheel. He criticised its stumpiness, pointing out that it was shorter and wider than the beautifully proportioned Alfa Romeo 2600 Spider, the Mercedes-Benz stylists using 'several tricks' to 'give the illusion of length'.

Mercedes' PR officers drew Seifert's attention to the optional hardtop which they themselves likened to a Japanese pagoda, foreshadowing the car's sobriquet. Patented in 1956 before stylist Paul Bracq started work on the rest of the car, the roof was designed to maximise all-round visibility while also providing a rigid platform for a luggage rack. Seifert was unconvinced, describing the styling as, 'reasonably attractive' but ultimately derivative of the established 220SE coupé, adding, 'the vision may be excellent but the top looks awful'.

Once the magazine's road-testers had finally got their hands on one on American soil free of Mercedes' control, they seemed even more damning. 'It takes considerable head-scratching to



High screen makes roof-down cruising comfortable



As with the 911, the SL is acceptable everywhere



Classic Cars

Classic Cars 49



decide just what the 230SL is,' its anonymous writer opined. 'Is it a sports car? A Teutonic Thunderbird? The ultimate in GT? Defining the term "sports car" is as difficult as ever. Whatever it is – perhaps a standard classification would be unfair – it is certainly individual; not quite like anything else on the road.'

You'd expect this kind of nonplussed confusion when presented with, say, a Citroën DS for the first time, but not a Mercedes SL, surely? Think again. Back in 1963, who else was making a two-seater roadster to the highest standards of quality and boasting race-bred technology under the bonnet, yet with the focus on luxury and comfort rather than sportiness?

I find myself almost lazing as I guide the Papyrus White SL onto Bond Street, twirling the power-assisted recirculating-ball steering with forefinger and thumb, and admiring the car's reflection in the vast windows of the high-end jewellers. I find myself thinking of the last Mercedes SL I drove – a 300SL – and that was very different, which just serves to highlight the difficult task this new one would have had to assert itself.

Back in the very early Sixties, 'Mercedes SL' carried very different connotations. The 300 Sport Leicht was nothing less than a racing car for the road, a ballsy counterpart to the machines driven by Moss and Fangio. The Gullwing was essentially a supercar before the term was commonplace, and fearsome too. A combination of Formula One-derived engine and swing-arm suspension means that the faster you go in a 300SL, the greater the fear that sudden deceleration or throttle lift mid-corner will lead to the rear halfshafts suffering abrupt Triumph Spitfire-style tuck-under and hurling the car

## 'The W113 existed in the shadow of a colossus, yet replaced a failure'

off the road. Although the Roadster version that followed used a more benign low-pivot version of the rear suspension layout, its ferocious speed, manual-only gearbox and high, wide sills meant it was still a machine for the committed.

In addition, there had been the 190SL. It may have superficially resembled its bigger brother but in spirit it was more like a Sunbeam Alpine or a Volkswagen Karmann-Ghia – a blatantly saloon-based sports-car lookalike designed to inject some glamour into the range on which it was based rather than achieve anything serious. The 190SL hadn't sold well, costing a whole \$1000 more than a Ford Thunderbird while offering barely a third of the brake horsepower.

The new 230SL, therefore, walked an awkward tightrope between two extremes. It existed in the shadow of a colossus, yet replaced a failure, and shared a name with both. As with the 190SL, a saloon platform lurked beneath its crisp lines. But under the bonnet was something as special as the 300SL's slant-six. I pull off into Bourdon Place to satisfy my curiosity.

Tilt forward the 230SL's bonnet. Watch as the subtlest of power bulges dips beneath the top of the grille rather than lurching upwards on unsightly jagged hinges. The streetlights reveal, alongside the 2.3-litre straight-six, what appears to be another, tiny engine, with each cylinder head wearing a little pipe to the main block. The micro-engine is in fact the car's fuel-injection system. Merely possessing injection was sophisticated enough in a world of chuntering, tricky-to-balance carburettors. Not even Rolls-Royce or Ferrari used it in 1963.

Yet the 230SL's system took things even further. Whereas Mercedes' luxury saloons had twin-pump setups split between their six cylinders, the 230SL – like the 300SL before it – featured



Capaciousness,  
comfort, quality and  
luxury but discreet



# 1965 Mercedes-Benz 230SL

Engine 2304cc in-line six-cylinder, sohc, Bosch mechanical fuel injection Power and torque 170bhp @ 5600rpm; 159lb ft @ 4500rpm

Transmission Four-speed automatic, rear-wheel drive Steering Power-assisted recirculating-ball Suspension Front: independent, wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar, Rear: independent, swing-axes, coil springs, transverse coil spring, telescopic dampers

Brakes Discs front, drums rear, servo-assisted Weight 1361kg Performance

Top speed: 119mph, 0-60mph: 11.5sec Fuel consumption

22mpg Cost new

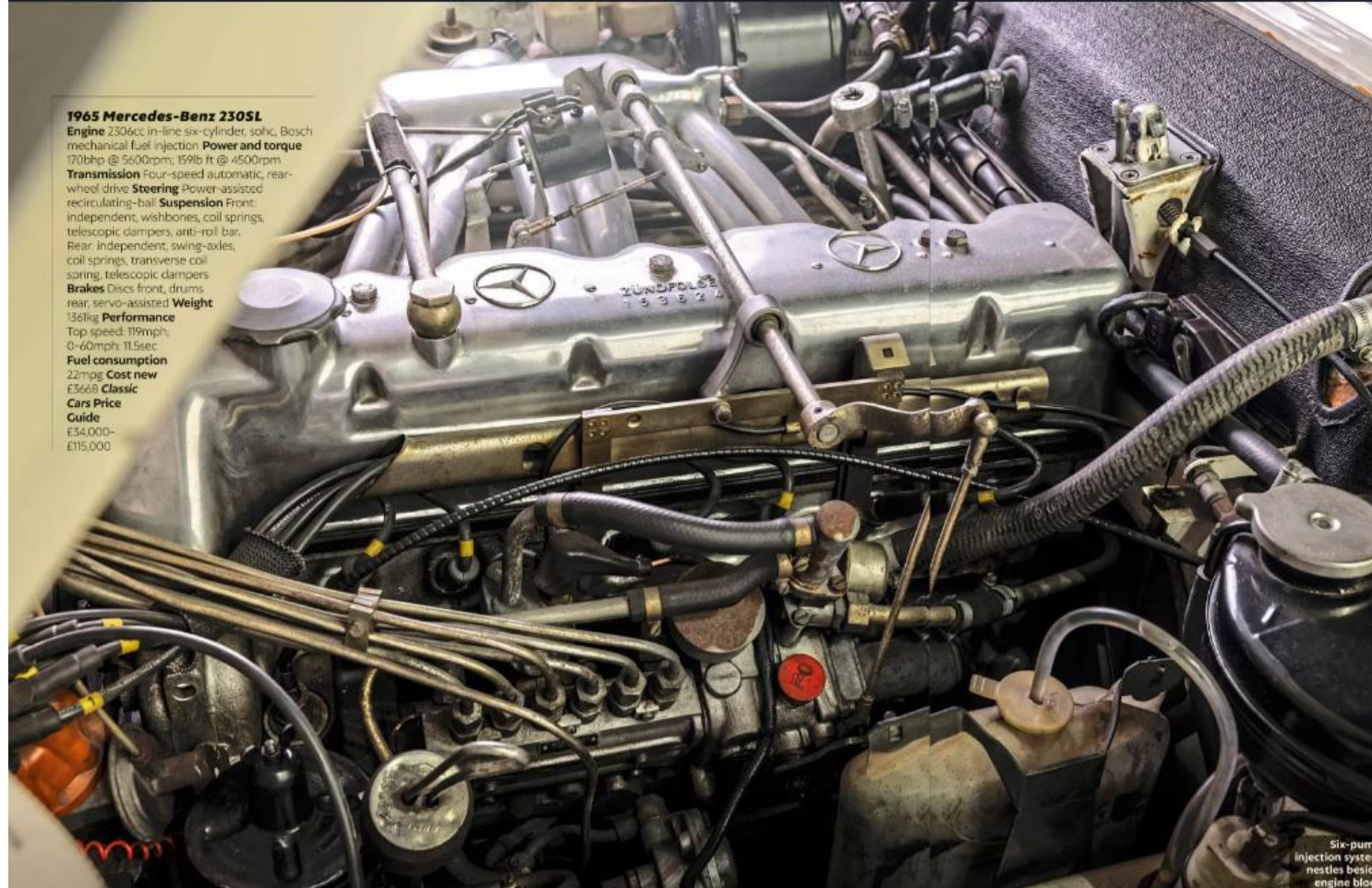
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Cars Price

Guide

£34,000-

£115,000



Six-pump injection system nestles beside engine block

a full six-pump system with near-direct injection for improved metering and throttle response. Bear in mind that multi-port and direct-injection setups were still sufficiently special for cars sporting it to boast 'MPI' and 'GDI' badges advertising the fact well in the 2010s. In the Sixties, this technology was the preserve of the aircraft and high-end marine industries.

As I close the bonnet and pass the Gagosian art gallery, currently exhibiting the work of German-American conceptual artist Mark Grotjahn, my mind wanders to the kind of people who bought Pagoda SLs when they were new. Film and TV spins a version of SL ownership that I'm not sure is strictly accurate. On English-speaking celluloid it was the drop-top choice of playboys and femmes fatale – think Albert Finney and Audrey Hepburn in *Two For The Road* – the car used was Hepburn's own – Julie Christie in *Shampoo*, Peter Wyngarde in *Department S*, and perhaps most perfectly, Helen Mirren in *The Long Good Friday*. In mainland Europe, however, it was usually portrayed hardtop-on, driven by gritty detectives and spies as they hurtled down unrestricted 'bahns' and 'strada' in German police procedurals and Italian Giallo thrillers.

And yet, if you look at a list of famous SL owners, from the Pagoda through to the current model, there is a recurring theme that raises a quizzical eyebrow at first – Formula One drivers, it seems, love them. One of the most high-profile Pagoda owners nowadays, cherishing the car as a classic, is David Coulthard.

I find myself wondering why, realising that I'm just a few blocks away from 44 Shepherd Street, the mews house designed by Sir Stirling Moss. Moss was one of the first British 230SL owners – both he and Juan-Manuel Fangio were presented with them in Stuttgart by Alfred Neubauer. It replaced Moss's Facel-Vega HK500 as his vehicle of choice for cross-continental dashes, as he embraced his post-racing career as a journalist.

Like the Facel, it's a comfortable, powerful way to eat thousands of miles. However, unlike the hefty Chrysler V8-powered HK500, there's a much more modern quality to the 230SL. It's compact, reined in with powerful front disc brakes, and just as easy to drive on congested city streets as a Cortina Mk1. The Mercedes delivers a similar kind of thrust as the

'Uhlenhaut had made "cornering power" his foremost concern'



Elegant mirror design lost in 1967 280SL's updates



Manual 'box available, but SL feels natural as an automatic

idiosyncratic French grand tourer, but it does so with a sense of efficiency and a lack of fuss simply not present in something heavy and lurching with 6.3 litres of cast iron in its nose.

And it's this quality that, I suspect, makes the various generations of SL appeal to racing drivers, both then and now. Efficiency, rather than outright grunt, is what wins races, especially long-distance endurance events. And if you've ever met an F1 driver, you're often struck by what calm, serene people they are. Hotheads plagued with red mist struggle to make effective decisions at 200mph.

With the leaf-obscured streetlights of Berkeley Square framed in the 230SL's upright Panavision windscreen, I imagine Moss returning home from a long weekend commentating on a race somewhere like Monaco or Monza, having crossed the Alps en route. High-speed refined cruising ability is a given with the SL, but despite its pedestrian gearboxes and low-geared steering, the SL's abilities as a sports car are surprising.

As Moss noted to the press when he took delivery of his 230SL in 1963, chief engineer Rudolf Uhlenhaut had begun the Pagoda's design as a clean-sheet exercise with 'cornering power'





## 'Uhlenhaut lapped Monthoux in 47.5 seconds. Mike Parkes only managed 47.3 in a 250GT SWB'

– roadholding – as his foremost concern given the waywardness of the 300SL. Journalists were first let loose in the 'Pagoda' SL on France's Monthoux circuit, where they were confused by its soft, saloon-like demeanour, but immediately impressed when Uhlenhaut took the wheel himself. Demonstrating the incredibly low-set pivots of the new rear swing-axes and the abilities of the horizontal compensator spring, Uhlenhaut hurled the 230SL into Monthoux's vicious triple-hairpin complex at speed. The SL leaned heavily but its tyres never broke traction. Uhlenhaut lapped the track in 47.5 seconds. Earlier that day, Ferrari had been using the same circuit. Mike Parkes only managed 47.3 in a 250GT SWB. Mercedes also announced that day that Eugen Böhringer would be proving the new SL in rallying.

Interestingly, as it neared the end of its production run, two magazines – *Motor* in the UK and the old SL nemesis *Road & Track* in the US – pitched the most powerful Pagoda evolution, the 280SL, into group tests against 'proper' sports cars. Both featured Jaguar E-types, while in the UK the SL curiously also battled the Triumph TR5, Lotus Elan S4, Marcos 1600 and AC 428. *Road & Track* threw in the Chevrolet Corvette Stingray and Porsche 911T. The British journalists were surprised by its wildness and it unexpectedly shamed the TR5 in handling tests. In the American test, it finished second only to the Porsche. The only main criticisms were saloon-style nose-bob in corners, and overly long automatic gearing.

Perhaps a mercurial clue to this element of the SL lies in its nomenclature. Mercedes has always been coy about explaining exactly what 'SL' stands for post-300SL, especially because it's only got portlier since the 1361kg 'Pagoda'. But in German, *Leicht* has a double meaning. As well as referring to weight, it also means 'easy' or 'effortless'. And within this cryptic clue lies

the W113's true innovation. It makes rapid progress simple, smooth and elegant in an era when sporty cars were either raw and raucous or powerful but hefty. No end of imitators have come and gone over the years – Triumph Stag, Cadillac Allante, BMW Z8, Lexus SC430, even the F149 Ferrari California – but they've all been found wanting largely as a result of lacking that sense of effortless elegance.

I pass one of those advertising billboards again, with a sharp-suited male model exiting his green Pagoda SL, and think back to Bourdon Place, where I parked earlier, a hive of artistic activity with a statue of Terence Donovan photographing Twiggy as a centrepiece. Away from F1 drivers and business tycoons, one of the reasons this car feels so at home in this part of London has nothing to do with it being a classic at all. Style is inherently effortless. SL specialist Mario Fionda of Chelsea Cars – where this 1965 230SL is for sale – reckons 50 percent of his Pagoda buyers have never owned a classic before. They're more likely to be female, younger than the classic-car average, and will invariably be City professionals.

To them, the Pagoda SL is a dependable, undemanding car, just as capable of crossing a continent today as it was 60 years ago. But it's also an iconic design in the manner of a Mies van der Rohe 'Barcelona' chair or a Piaggio Vespa, one that's never really gone out of fashion or suffered a value collapse. Looking back at the billboard makes me realise that there has probably never been a year since 1963 when, at least somewhere in the world, a model did not at some point pose with a Pagoda SL as a fashion photographer's camera shutter clicked. Add genuine timelessness to its staggering list of qualities too.

Thanks to: Chelsea Cars ([chelseacars.com](http://chelseacars.com))

# EXPRESS of the ELITE

The Mercedes SL 'Pagoda' had the style and exclusivity to attract the most stylish and glamorous celebrities of the Sixties and beyond. Here are its A-list highlights

Words RICHARD MASON Photography RICHARD MASON/ALAMY/GETTY

**M**aking its debut in 1963, the Mercedes W113 SL replaced not one but two successful models – the 300SL and the 190SL – so it had to be good. In the UK it was nearly double the price of a Jaguar E-type, partly due to import tax, so it was largely the preserve of the rich and famous. More than 19,000 of the 49,000 made in its an eight-year production run were sold to the US, giving the W113 a north-American celebrity ownership bias, from astronauts to film stars.

That concave hardtop soon earned it the 'Pagoda' nickname. Today the W113 is regarded by many as the prettiest Mercedes ever, giving it star status. And stars who couldn't resist its charms included John Glenn, the first American to orbit the earth in 1963, and cartoon icon Walt Disney.

Walt rented his 1964 Ivory 230 SL back to his company for the 1965 film *That Darned Cat*, apparently charging \$100 a day for the privilege. 'It's a little beauty and almost as good as a blonde on each arm for getting a little envy from my fellow men,' he claimed.

Walt wasn't the only one using his car for work. Audrey Hepburn drove her 1965 230SL across France in the film *Two For The Road* shot in 1966. In the road-trip rom-com, Hepburn and co-star Albert Finney spend the journey to Saint-Tropez discussing their 12-year relationship. We never find out what she thinks about the SL, but it got a lot of screen time.

Hepburn's fellow Pagoda-owning Hollywoodites included Natalie Wood, Charlton Heston, Tony Curtis, Burt Lancaster and later John



Astronaut John Glenn accepts an SL from Daimler-Benz chairman Joachim Zahn



Audrey Hepburn drove her personal Pagoda SL in 1967's *Two For The Road*

**'As good as a blonde on each arm for getting envy from my fellow men' – Walt Disney**

Elvis's 280SL on display inside Presley Motors Automobile Museum in Graceland, Tennessee





Travolta. Some say Sophia Loren had one; she was certainly pictured in one. Elvis Presley, George Harrison and Maurice Gibb all bought Pagodas for their wives; John Lennon bought one for himself, as did Stevie Nicks of Fleetwood Mac.

Nicks was another to use her Pagoda professionally. In 1977 she co-produced *Fundamental Roll* by Walter Egan, who became her boyfriend. The album cover features her black 280SL on both front and back covers, possibly giving an insight into her attachment to it. Another photo shows her with the SL outside her Paradise Valley home. Stevie's body language says it all – this is my ride. Maybe a clue as to how Stevie views the SL is in a quote concerning an unreleased album, *Buckingham Nicks*, she made with then-boyfriend and Fleetwood Mac guitarist Lindsey Buckingham. 'Owning *Buckingham Nicks* between me and Lindsey is like owning an old Mercedes. One person says, "Let's release it!" and the other person goes, "I don't wanna let it go." And then three years later it's the other way around. That's what's been happening with *Buckingham Nicks* since 1975!'

Beatles guitarist George Harrison bought wife Pattie Boyd a red 280SL in 1968. Pattie recalls that, despite driving many expensive cars of the era, her all-time favourite was her 280SL. Comparing the SL to the E-type, she said, 'While the SL wasn't as fast as the Jaguar, it was easier to drive with the shorter bonnet, plus a higher driving position giving enhanced visibility, making it both safe and easy to park, especially in London. It really was a gorgeous car – and is, even today. I just fell in love with the look of the car. Its understated svelte lines, with the delicacy that only women appreciate. George liked it too, in fact we chose it together – but George didn't get to drive it much because it was my favourite. Anyway, he had other cars like his Mercedes 600 that he bought the same year, although that was second-hand!'

'There weren't really any drawbacks to the Pagoda; it was just such a super car to drive,' Pattie continues. 'Of course it was best in the summer with the hood down, but in the winter there was the hardtop. Ah, that was the one disadvantage – it needed

at least two people to put the hardtop on or take it off. It's very heavy. Nowadays I'm used to driving a modern Mercedes and it's unfair to compare the 280SL, because cars have changed a lot over the years. But the SL has those slim pillars that don't create any blindspots, plus a big windscreen and the low waistline gives a less enclosed feel. The interior is simply beyond compare against the bland plastics of today. To top it all is that gorgeous cream and chrome sculpture that is the steering wheel. For me it's a happy-making car.'

Staying with The Beatles, John Lennon's blue 1965 230SL automatic clearly didn't get a great deal of use. Even in 2019 it only had 19,000 miles on the clock and John had sold it back in 1970. However, it's been round the block in terms of countries and owners since he owned it. I remember seeing it once in a modest car museum in Sarasota, Florida. While the provenance of the vehicle is undoubted, nevertheless without photographs of its iconic owner behind the wheel the exhibit lacked impact. After 17 years the museum sold it at a Scottsdale auction in January 2019. Media speculation was that it would sell for anything from \$500,000 to \$3m. It went for \$225,000. Imagine!

The ex-Stirling Moss 1966 230SL followed in John Lennon's wheel tracks by achieving £177,750 at the Silverstone UK auction in August 2022. Maybe it would have achieved more, had it not been repainted Jaguar Pearl Grey in 1970. Also, it needed recommissioning, having not moved in many years. Moss heaped praise upon the

W113, 'In all the years I have been driving, I cannot remember ever driving a car that I would have liked to own more.' He requested that Mercedes fit a roof vent to the hard top similar to that on the Gullwing, only wider. No other W113 has ever had this. He also specified the 250SL engine, because at that time the 250 was not yet made in right-hand drive.

Mercedes realised Moss collecting his new SL from Stuttgart was an excellent promotional opportunity, photographing him being flagged away by old race team boss Alfred Neubauer. The SL is on German export plates – fine, but where's that unique hard top? Surely he'll need that at the other end?

The Pagoda was registered with Moss' private number plate, M7, seven being his lucky number. However, in a Moss advert for J-Wax Car Polish, the SL in the photo – although wearing the M7 registration – is clearly not his car because it's left-hand drive. In any case, Stirling didn't keep his bespoke Pagoda SL for long, parting with it in 1968.

Like Moss, Steve McQueen was impressed by the Pagoda's composure as well as describing it as a handsome car. Giving an automatic 230SL a shakedown at Riverside Raceway near Los

Angeles for *Sports Illustrated* he described his experience, 'I drove it hard and got it out of shape a bit, but it behaved very nicely, never tried to bite me.' Steve was impressed by the automatic gearbox, 'Very suitable for people who do not like to shift, although personally I'd take the four-speed stick shift.' A former owner of

the earlier 300SL, he came to the conclusion that the 230SL was underpowered for the money, but an outstanding lady's car.

When actor Harold Sakata – Odd Job in Bond film *Goldfinger* – visited Stuttgart in 1966 to try out a 230SL, a Daimler press release announced, 'Oddjob had asked for several refinements. On the list were interchangeable licence plates, an exhaust that would spread oil on the road and a device for releasing nails to halt pursuers. Daimler-Benz assures, however, that the car delivered to Mr Sakata is equipped like all other 230SLs.'

Fast forwarding a half a century and a new breed of celebs are beguiled by the Pagoda's svelte lines, including model Kate Moss and F1 drivers Nico Rosberg and David Coulthard. Apparently Coulthard was attracted to his 280SL because it was made in April 1971, a month before he was born, and he wanted a car the same age as him. He put his Pagoda to work harder than fellow celebrities, driving it on a recce of the Monaco Circuit in 2009 for television. He even got the tyres squealing.

Actor John Travolta's Pagoda ownership was distinguished by having his brown 280SL stolen in September 2011. Apparently he had stopped to buy groceries in Santa Monica and was only gone a few minutes. Eventually it was traced, but not before it had been dismantled for spares, giving poor Travolta *Saturday Night Fever*. Maybe a little *Grease* would help.

Ironically, singer Janis Joplin never owned a Mercedes yet her 1970 song *Mercedes Benz* was no doubt influenced by all those Pagodas. Instead she bought a Porsche. Oh Lord!

**'I cannot remember ever driving a car that I'd have liked to own more' – Stirling Moss**

**'George didn't get to drive it much. It was my favourite' – Pattie Boyd**



Bee Gee Maurice Gibb with his wife Lulu, sitting in a Mercedes Pagoda he'd given her as a birthday present in 1970. It probably made her Shout

Pattie Boyd was also lucky enough to get an SL as a present from her husband, George Harrison. She loved its 'understated svelte lines'



Stirling Moss being flagged away by his old chief, Alfred Neubauer on collection of his bespoke 230SL, with wife Elaine in the passenger seat