

Classic Cars REVIVED

Want the speed and ease of a new car, plus the style and panache of a classic? Time for a pit stop at Frank Rickert's garage.



A stone's throw from the Mercedes-Benz factory in Stuttgart, garage owner Frank Rickert gives old-timers a power boost by installing brand new, top-of-the-range motors inside the classic chassis. His biggest kick is 'putting the cars back where they belong: on the left lane of the autobahn (an expressway in German-speaking countries).'

A sports car stuck behind the diesel fumes of a lorry is a sad sight. It could go much faster but the driver is worried about his engine. Driving a classic car also means having the garage on standby, in case of a breakdown. But a vintage car owner's biggest fear is ending up in a traffic jam. Stopping and starting over several kilometres is poison to an old-timer.

When the Mercedes-Benz SL W 113 arrived on the market in 1963, traffic jams were unheard of. The new Mercedes was a dream car, technically ahead of its years. Rickert is a fan: 'An easy vehicle that was at home on the left lane of the motorway... and that is where it belongs.'

Rickert is the owner and founder of Mechatronik, a company that's causing quite a storm amongst classic car enthusiasts. Rickert takes old-timers and completely rebuilds them from the inside with up-to-date technology; only the original bodywork stays. Under the bonnet, a new V6 engine driven by a three-valve technology cranks up the speed to a maximum of 230 kilometres per hour, with an acceleration of zero to 100 in 6.5 seconds. From the old SL comes a new MSL – the M is for Mechatronik. Rickert glows with pride at his 'revolution in restoring oldtimers', while others hardly appreciate his work or think of it as adverse, a point they make clear when writing in to specialist magazines.

Putting in the new engine and all the additional parts required for the rejuvenation of a classic, together with dismantling and reassembly costs can sometimes amount to the cost of a brand new sports car.

Rickert and his 14 mechanics work in Pleidelsheim, in a workshop that is almost as clean as an operating theatre. Workshop cleaner Efstratos Paroutsis does his rounds with his mop and broom at a leisurely pace, going past the benches where the tools are lined up like a surgeon's instruments and weaving between Rickert's 'sleeping beauties' – the 15 classic cars currently waiting to be restored.



Wearing immaculate dungarees, the mechanics begin work, like sculptors or doctors; sculptors because in between all the sharpening, grinding and drilling, they polish the parts and examine them carefully, pulling a frown now and then before continuing. They sometimes look like doctors as they peer into the car's winding innards, searching for rust, pitting or tiny depressions in the pistons.

There's a notice on the time clock that reads 'Please clock on and off for each smoking break. Make up the time in the evening.' The initiative came from the non-smokers, not the boss. They say that everyone should work the same number of hours – 45 per week. For some – like mechanic Andreas Hudlett, that isn't enough. He slips Bach into the workshop's stereo late at night and enjoys 'bringing dead iron and steel back to life.'

At Mechatronik, they only use Mercedes-Benz parts. From the outside, it's hard to tell the difference. Even the dashboard is completely original, although its heart is entirely electronic.

For €2,500, the customer can store the original parts at the garage. The car can be back-fitted at any time,' stresses Rickert.

'We do MSLs for customers who want to get to their yacht in southern France quickly on Friday afternoon, turning

old-timers into cars for daily use.'

Once, Rickert invited Manfred Luft for a test drive. Luft is the chairman of the 'Mercedes-Benz SL Club Pagoda', with 1,100 members. The sports car is called the 'pagoda', because the hard top looks a little like the roof of an Oriental building. Although 49,000 'pagodas' were made (up to 1971), Luft estimates there are only around 6,000 left.

After the test drive, Luft was excited by the way the rejuvenated car responded. 'At the bends, the original pagodas quickly lose control at the rear and when breaking.' But still, Luft squirms at the idea of the revamp: 'As a lover of old-timers, I don't think the MSL is a good option.' It's all about purity: Classics should remain completely original even if it means not going very fast. Luft passionately describes the experience of driving in a classic sports car at 80 kilometres per hour with the roof down, larks singing and a warm wind coming off the vineyards: 'Then you don't want to drive any faster anyway!'

'Yes, you do,' retorts Rickert. 'At least some people do.' Only around half of his orders are for original restorations. Increasing numbers of vintage car owners want to modernise. It's only the 300 SL gull-wing door models that would escape the addition of modern technology.

'That would be a sacrilege,' says Rickert, 'the car is too unique to be treated like that.' But he doesn't hesitate to put orthopedic seats into the tail fin models or plant an S class engine in a Pullman belonging to a hotel that needs to pick passengers up from the airport without breakdowns.

His customers from Asia, in particular, are interested in the careful conversion to an MSL. Rickert's secretary hands him a fax from Singapore – a pagoda owner enquiring about a Mchatronik conversion. Rickert's people are currently working on two pagodas that were shipped over from Japan.

Rickert's encounters with vehicles started early. When he was 15, a young neighbour sold him an old moped that he'd taken apart and couldn't put back together. Rickert carried the moped in plastic bags up to his bedroom and put it together piece by piece, like a giant jigsaw. He started an apprenticeship in a garage but, lacking challenging jobs, was soon bored. A teacher from his technical college arranged an apprenticeship at the AMG garage. It was there that he met an old master, an esteemed mechanic who let him experiment, make mistakes – and learn.

The young mechanic set up his own company, at first installing hands-free equipment into cars. Then a management consultant met Rickert and recognised in him the same drive he'd

had in his mid-20s. They flew to a dealer in New York, paid a lot of money and returned to Germany with 10 Mercedes-Benz classics, mainly pagodas – all scrap. 'You don't let people die, you give them a heart transplant,' says Rickert.

He had no orders for a whole year but he potted around on the MSL prototype. Up to a year ago, he was still working in a boiler suit in an ugly workshop with a view of a petrol station. Six months ago, he moved into the new building that had enough space for the demonstration models they restored themselves. For example, the 300 SC Coupe. 'A decadent car, it was as expensive as a detached house,' he says. His favourite, an MSL, also stands on show.

It's time to take it for a spin.

At first, the sound is irritating. The characteristic 'pithy' sports car sound is gone. The engine only buzzes like an insect. This often upsets the purists. All you hear is the wind whistling around the roof of the pagoda.

But amazement at the contrast between old design and new performance outweighs doubts. As I look at the shining silver dashboard and hold the steering wheel with my fingertips, so much more elegant than today's too ergonomic versions, I soon feel the same reverence as I have for old paintings or antiques. I have the urge to handle the car with kid gloves, so I don't break anything. Then, it suddenly dawns on me that with a back-fitted car this isn't necessary: I can put my foot down on the accelerator without worrying about the engine, and hit high speeds with no problem. I soon fall in love with the ease at which the car responds and at the speed it takes the corners. Power and performance are combined to perfection. Rickert, however, waits nervously in his office until I bring his baby back in one piece. Then, he suggests we go for another test drive. This time, Rickert drives down the motorway with the top down. Nothing vibrates, nothing jolts; the car is as quiet as a limousine on the street. 'But what's that?' asks Rickert. He heard a slight whistle that the passenger would never have noticed. He takes his right hand from the steering wheel, searches for something above the dashboard; now his face is critical, impatient. When he touches the rubber seal between the glass and the frame the barely noticeable whistling stops. 'The seal is flapping,' says Rickert disapprovingly. 'We have to improve that.'

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