



Gernold Nisius

Mercedes-Benz Pagoda SLs are in expert hands at SL-Tech

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID LaCHANCE

The Mercedes-Benz 113-series SLs, probably best known by their “pagoda-roof” nickname, have been around for longer than you might think. Even the newest 280 SL turns 40 this year, while the oldest 230 SL will turn—could it really be?—50 years old in 2013. It’s a long time for any car, even a premium car like an SL, to survive in this world, and few examples escape the scars of age. Things rust, wear out, break and fall off; cruelest of all is the neglect and corner-cutting that borders on the malicious.

Gernold Nisius has seen it all.

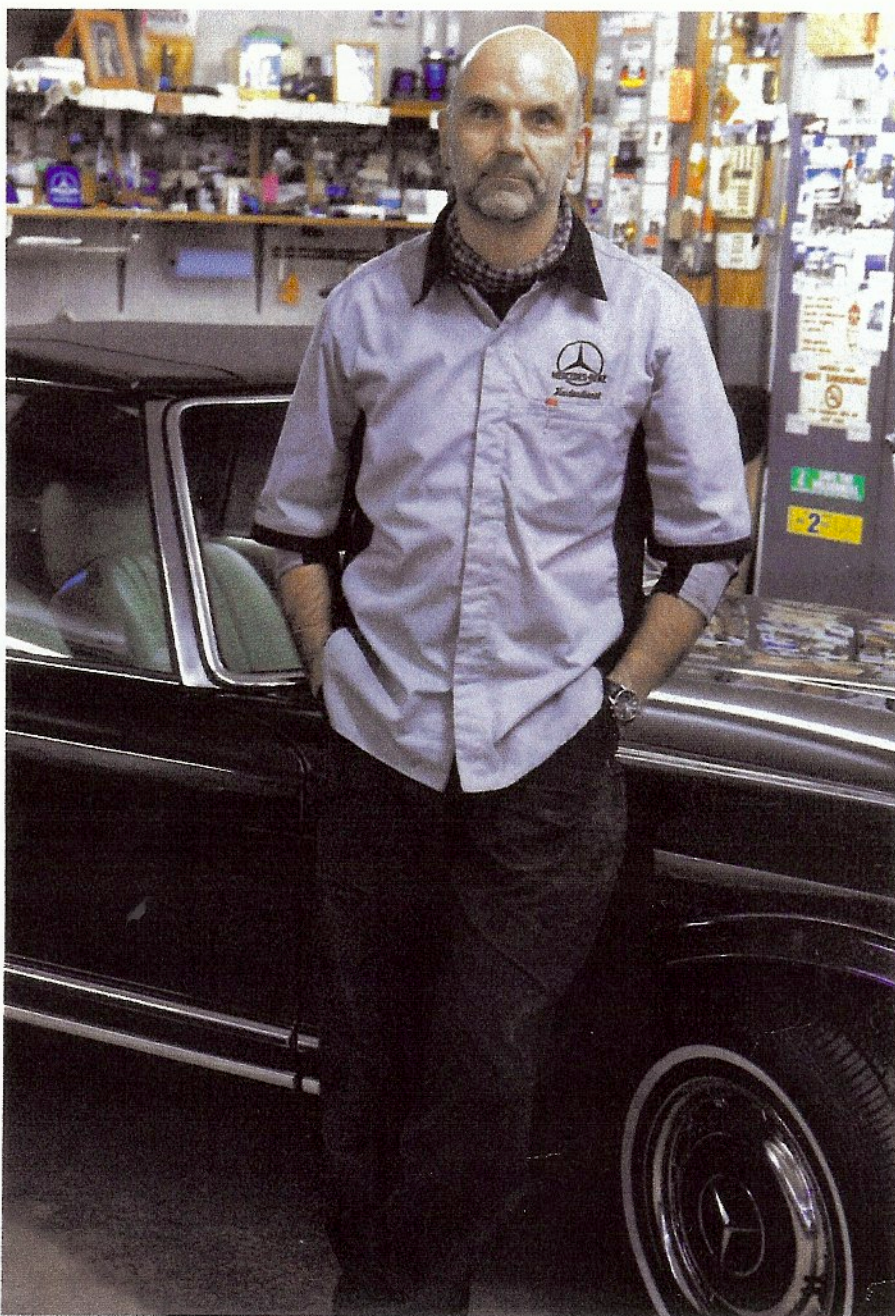
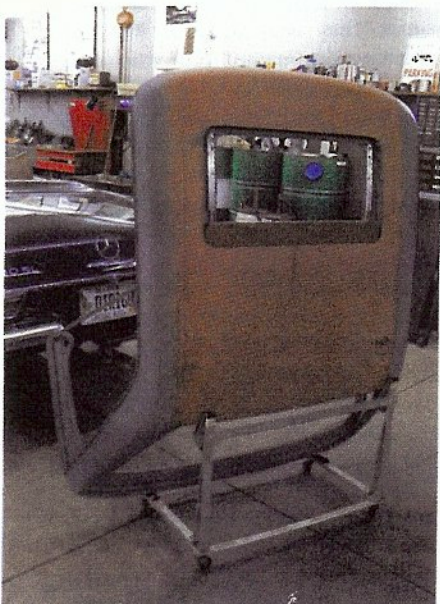
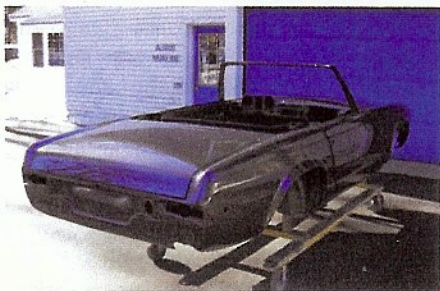
“There are very few of them that haven’t been picked apart all the way around, and most of that work has been done pretty

lousy, I have to say,” Gernold says. “They put on two brake calipers in front, and only one new hose. Who the hell did this? How can you put one brake hose in the front? Of course, it’s pulling to that side where the new hose is. But I find that stuff all the time.” He pauses. “Whoever puts on one brake hose in the front,” he continues, choosing his words carefully, “is not much of a mechanic.”

Coming from the German-born Gernold, the product of that country’s rigorous training regimen and holder of the respected title of *KFZ-Mechanikermeister*, or master mechanic, that’s pretty close to damnation. From his point of view, there’s only one way to do a job: If the factory used a

clip, you use a clip. If the factory used 12 screws, you use 12 screws. And if a bolt got a lock washer on the assembly line, you’d better make sure you put one on, too.

This is how Mercedes-Benz SLs are restored to good mechanical health. It’s a job Gernold has been doing for 20 years at SL-Tech, his one-man shop in Arundel, Maine, just to the north of the tourist town of Kennebunkport. He’s been so successful that SL enthusiasts from coast to coast use terms like “ultimate guru” and “living legend” to describe him. Gernold is by no means the only specialist in the U.S. who restores Pagoda SLs, but to his knowledge, he’s the only one who works exclusively on those cars. That specialization has given

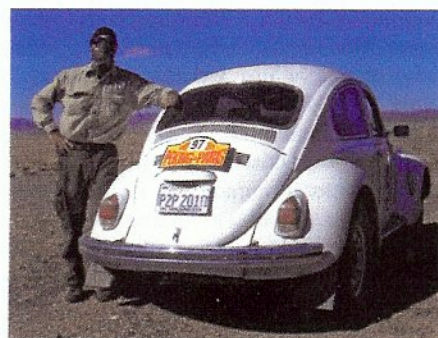


him the kind of encyclopedic knowledge of these cars that few, if any, can match.

Gernold began the studies that would lead to his becoming a master mechanic as soon as he had graduated from high school in his hometown of Birkenfeld, Germany. "That's quite a title in Germany," he explains. "The laws, of course, are different. In Germany, you cannot have a repair place unless you are a master mechanic, and if you are not one, you have to hire one to run your place." He began by becoming apprenticed to a local Mercedes-Benz dealer in 1974. "That's how you did it—apprenticeship at a local dealer, three and a half years, and you'd typically keep working at the dealership as

long as they needed you.

"I worked there, then I joined the service. I was in the air force for two years; that's where I started the master's degree." While in the air force, he completed two of the four courses required for the degree, learning business management and teaching—the latter a necessity for having apprentices. After leaving the service, he enrolled in the technical school part-time to complete his studies in the other two areas, hands-on mechanical work and mechanical theory. "I went to the school part-time, took the entire vacation for that year, and every Friday and Saturday I went to school. That went on for two years," he says. In 1984, he became the youngest



Gernold closed up his shop for several weeks this fall to take part in the 34-day, 10,000-mile Peking to Paris rally, co-driving a 1968 Volkswagen. A dust mask was a must in the harsh conditions.



Bent and broken top frames can be mended on a jig. Soft tops are fitted on a 280 SL shell.

master mechanic in his county.

He worked at other dealerships, then joined up with a friend's father who had a business selling bicycles and mopeds, and wanted to add Suzuki motorcycles. He was there for four years before he got the fateful telephone call from an uncle living in the United States.

It seemed that another relative, a distant cousin living in the remote Maine town of Parsonsfield, had gotten into a jam with a Jeep CJ-7 project. "He had picked it apart—it was a total wreck, and he couldn't do anything with it. He was not a mechanic," Gernold recalls. The uncle suggested that Gernold come to the rescue. "That's how it started. I came over here and I totally assembled the CJ-7 with a fiberglass body. I spoke very little English at the time, and he basically left me with a workplace and a telephone." His English education was supplemented by reading the Sunday *New York Times* with a dictionary at his side. During the six months it took to do the job, he met his future wife. He returned to Germany, came back to the U.S. on a visa, got married and got his green card.

He decided to stay in Maine, and to start a business there. "I liked the area. I do like the winter, I have to say that; I am a winter person. I like the snow, I like the cold weather." Fickle Maine had put on one of its picture-book winters, with clear, dry days and fluffy, clean, Currier and

Ives snow. It was an appealing contrast to his native Birkenfeld, where winters were not as cold and a one-foot accumulation was considered a major snowfall. Gernold became a winter sports enthusiast, cross-country skiing, mountaineering, hiking and camping in the snow. (You could say he has an adventurous spirit—he's climbed in the Himalayas, and recently closed his shop for several weeks to be a co-driver in the grueling, 10,000-mile 2010 Peking to Paris rally, aboard a 1968 Volkswagen Beetle.)

The distant cousin was instrumental to the start-up of SL-Tech; it was Gernold's introduction to the generosity of the American people, something he has never forgotten. At his cousin's property in Parsonsfield, Maine, Gernold began repairing cars, and also worked through contacts to broker cars for sale to a European connection. "I kind of tried in the beginning with different German brands, but that never went anywhere," he says. "I said, 'You know what, this has got to stay Mercedes,' because that was really where the money is. I always followed that trail, not dealing with people that couldn't write the check. I thought that would be a mistake from day one. And on Mercedes, I found people wanted to do the service, and would pay for it. But rarely could they find somebody to do it." His work was expensive, but it was top-notch, and he developed a following. After

two years, he moved his shop to Arundel, nearer to Route 95 for his customers' convenience.

How did he decide to specialize in the 113? "That's a good question," Gernold replies. "A friend of mine in western Massachusetts that I met through brokerage was working on all different things. I said, 'What classic Mercedes should I specialize in?' I said, 'I like the 113—I have one.' And he said, 'You know, there's a strong following on those cars, but nobody really does them.' So I picked that one up. And I always liked the car."

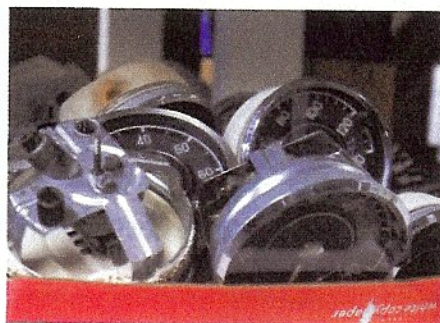
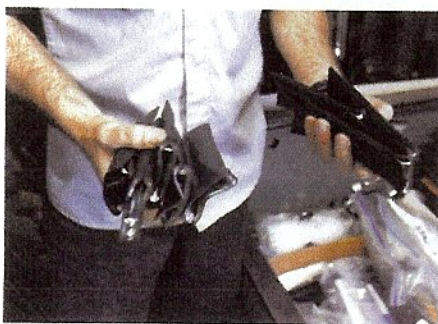
Why? "I just like the way it's built," he answers. "That's my favorite part, the way that car is built. It's just the whole assembly, the way it is built, it's like a tank. Solidly. It represents to me everything that German manufacturing can do. You look at that, it's all this Teutonic craftsmanship all the way around. Everything on that car is crafted in a way. It's all very well built and it drives that way, too, solid."

As a child of 1960, "I always liked the Sixties cars. They were probably the pinnacle of Mercedes quality. That was really when it evolved into the best cars you could buy," he says. "You could probably spend more money in 1970 to buy a car, but you could not buy a better car. You could spend more money buying a Rolls-Royce, but you wouldn't have bought a better car."

"I'm not a Fifties Mercedes person. What I do is Sixties. And the reason I don't mix-mingle them is that everything on a Fifties Mercedes is different than on a Sixties Mercedes. As far as the hardware you use, nothing really works there. There is no interchanging hardly anything. The plating was different on the Fifties Mercedes, you had a lot of stuff that was black anodized, there was very little in that gold cadmium [used in the later cars]. I don't like working on Fifties because I have nothing for them. They're different. That's where the German comes in—you do one thing and one thing only. I don't like to mix-mingle it."

Gernold does everything at his shop but paintwork, chrome and leather upholstery, which he farms out to local specialists. In addition to the lift and spacious and immaculate work area, the ground floor also holds a jig he had built for repairing the notoriously trouble-prone soft top frame, as well as an entire 280 SL shell that he uses for applying new covers to the frames. With new, bare frames costing \$10,000 from Mercedes, repairing the old ones is a lucrative business, and, with his jigs, is a service he can expertly handle without ever seeing the customer's car.

Upstairs at the shop is a treasure trove of SL parts. There are new and used taillamps,



A luggage rack, for the steel hardtop, top left, and ski rack, top right, are among the rarest factory accessories on the shelves.

grilles, tool kits, radios and much more. Refurbished seats sit in one corner, ready for installation; air conditioning compressors occupy another. Gernold shows off a couple of his rare finds, including a factory, trunk-mounted ski rack and a luggage rack for the steel roof. Ringing the building are more parts in the form of rusted SLs, too far gone to restore.

That cache of parts, Gernold realizes, will only become more valuable as supplies of new and reproduction parts dry up. "We have to keep in mind one thing on the 113 chassis: When Mercedes opened their Classic Center in Germany in 1993, they took the 113 as a pilot project, and they were planning then to supply as many new parts as they could for the 113. We had the luxury of having a lot of parts available for the 113, and the owners became spoiled. Now people will call me, and they'll say I want this and that for my 280, and I have to tell them it's not available anymore, and they're completely baffled.

"It's different things every day—there are some little grommets you can't get anymore, there are no wiper blades, you substitute the wiper blades in the black, no longer that silver original-looking thing

they had for years, there are no ashtrays anymore. It's starting—I can see it." Things have not yet become dire, though; "You still can buy 80 percent of the car, which is phenomenal."

Though the 113s have become increasingly popular in the past few years, Gernold says that, as with most cars, the costs of a proper restoration still outweigh a car's potential market value. "Total restoration is \$150,000, and then they end up with a car that is worth about \$100,000 maximum. And that is very hard to get—it has to be a perfect car. As we know today, if you look around at this business, everyone will tell you that labor costs are getting prohibitive, and the parts...there's only one direction with these parts, they go up and up and up and up, and Mercedes doesn't care what your car is worth.

"If you own one of these cars, and you do it correctly, you very quickly outspend the value of the car. You've got to ask yourself, is that the right way to do it? I don't know. I have both extremes going on here. I have customers who do everything correctly, and they don't care how much they spend. And they have excellent cars." If the goal is to maintain value, he adds,

"Then you put it into an excellent, rust-free example." If you can find one, that is.

If Gernold were to wager on which of the 113s would appreciate the most, he'd pick the earliest cars. "I believe down the road, early 230 SLs will become more valuable. They're far harder to restore because you've got fewer parts for it—the factory supplies most parts for a 280 because it was the last model available, and early parts that were on a 230 are harder to come by. It's much more difficult to correctly restore a '64 or a '63.

"Those are just beautiful. And they drive nice. The 230 SL engine was a carryover from the 220s. There's something about these engines. They don't rev high, they're a low-revving engine that has smooth power, not as busy as a 280. That is just a nice way to drive. If you're considering buying a 280 SL, give the 230 SL a chance and you will be pleasantly surprised." 🌐

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