

# Coming Out On Top

The stars aligned during the long-term restoration of a **1971 Mercedes-Benz 280 SE 3.5 Cabriolet** to produce a hugely authentic car and benefit all involved

BY MARK J. McCOURT • PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID LaCHANCE



Most will agree that undertaking the complete restoration of a car has to be done for the love of it, because such a project is typically a losing financial proposition. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the wild value spikes that the classic-car market has experienced over the past five years have, in rare instances, turned that concept on its head. Rare and coveted cars like Mercedes-Benz's last classic five-passenger flagship convertible, the 280 SE 3.5 of 1969-1971, have become so valuable that they can buck the trend, which happened in the instance of the 10-year restoration that produced this incredibly correct example of a final-year Cabriolet.

In 2001, Alexandria, Virginia, resident Michael Dyke was contemplating finding a Mercedes convertible that could accommodate his family better than the two-seat 280 SL and Porsche Boxster he then owned. He turned to Gernold Nisius, proprietor of the Mercedes-Benz 113-series specialty firm SL-Tech (Profile in Excellence, *HS&EC* #66), as Gernold had previously done an excellent restoration of his 280 SL.

"I initially wanted something in good shape that we could drive around town," Michael recalls. "I prefer one-owner cars with known history, and I looked at some good examples up and down the East Coast, but I decided I wanted to restore a car so I'd

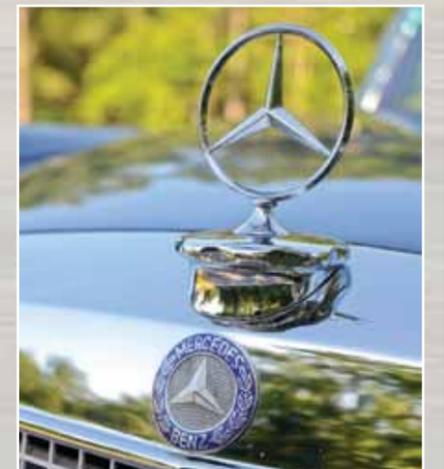
know its exact condition. I found this one in Miami, and had it inspected by someone who gave a thumbs-up on its quality."

The car he bought appeared to be a solid base for a restoration, having traveled 80,000 miles and been the recipient of a color-change repaint, when silver replaced the factory's Light Blue Metallic. This car had spent most of its years in the Northeast, moving south when its owner retired to Florida; it drove fine and looked presentable, but was basically tired. As is often the case, a number of issues, both minor and not-so-minor, would be revealed when the 3.5 made its way to Gernold's Arundel, Maine, shop.

"In 2002, \$125,000 would buy you a really nice 3.5 Cabriolet," Gernold recalls. "Michael paid about \$30,000 for this one. Once I got it, I determined it was terribly neglected, typical of any car from a first owner—it's maintained and accumulates most of its miles in the first 10 years, then it becomes a secondary car that might be stored at another house and only used sparingly. Those cars get no more preventative maintenance—the owners only fix whatever fails. Older Mercedes like this one are really well-built cars and they'll keep running, so owners feel they don't have to do anything to it."

This Master Mechanic knows every detail

of the Pagoda SL, but was less informed about the peculiarities of these 111-series cars, so he called upon his expert friends at Massachusetts's Hatch & Sons—a premier restoration facility for 3.5s—to inspect the car... who promptly recommended Michael sell it! They concurred with Gernold's estimate that a full and correct restoration of this Cabriolet, using Mercedes-Benz factory parts, would cost no less than \$200,000. This enthusiastic owner would not be dissuaded from his dream, so his trusted technician fashioned a tilting jig upon which he mounted the car to improve access, and commenced with full disassembly.





**1** Gernold built a jig that raised the car to a comfortable working height, tilted for ease of access and rolled so he could readily transport the shell.



**2** The unit-body car's integral rear fender had sideswipe damage and a bit of rust; it was completely replaced with new sheetmetal.



**3** The white 280 SE 3.5 Coupe donated a floor section and other parts to the Cabriolet, here seen returning from the body and paint shop wearing its original color.



**4** Gernold installed a new wiring harness in the Cabriolet; this replacement part was sourced directly from Mercedes-Benz.



**5** Metric Motors rebuilt the complex SOHC V-8, and cosmetics and final assembly were completed at SL-Tech.



**6** The rear axle assembly was completely restored with a replacement slip joint and all-new disc brake components.



**7** The bulky under-dash heater/de-froster/air conditioning blower unit was found to contain a mouse's nest.



**8** All front lighting components, from headlamp buckets and chrome surrounds to the orange marker lamps, were purchased new.



**9** The window frames were rechromed, and Gernold installed no-longer-available NOS vent window gaskets.



**10** The interior's original rosewood trim was in fine condition and was refinished by Madera Concepts before it was reinstalled.



**11** Every gray surface in the 3.5 interior is either leather or carpet. Here the convertible top well trim was expertly fitted.



**12** The convertible top bows were stripped and repainted, and the wooden supports remade, before the new multi-layer top was installed.



"It lived by the ocean with salty air, and the convertible top was left down through some rainstorms," Gernold explains. "Water had collected in the bowl-shaped depression under the back seat, where the metal rusted, and there'd been a minor accident up front and poorly repaired side-swipe damage to the driver's rear quarter. The top itself was in lousy shape, and although it was difficult to spot, this car was wearing a sedan front bumper, because the price difference between that style and the correct one for a Coupe or Cabriolet is staggering."



Although an interior can still be made from scratch, using a top-quality kit from a noted supplier costs one third as much.

Indeed, staggering is an appropriate term for the cost for many of the correct OEM replacement parts for this low-production car. Mercedes-Benz built just 1,232 W 111 Cabriolets and 3,270 Coupes that were powered by the new M116 V-8, whose 3,499-cc displacement gave the cars their 3.5 moniker. This advanced SOHC engine featured a 9.5:1 compression ratio and Bosch D-Jetronic electronic fuel injection, and made 230-hp at 6,050 RPM and 231-lb.ft. at 4,200 RPM; it was mated exclusively to a column- or floor-shifted four-speed automatic. The mechanicals followed typical Mercedes practice, with a fully independent suspension, power recirculating ball steering and four-wheel power disc brakes, and a stereo and air conditioning were standard equipment. Suitable for its lofty position in the range, our feature car cost \$14,509 in 1971 (\$85,600 in 2015 dollars), or almost twice the price of the contemporary 280 SL with soft and hard tops (\$7,909).

Michael had asked Gernold to use original Mercedes parts, and to work on the car as his schedule permitted. The restorer's first order of business was to send the bare shell to Gary Cove, owner of Werke Classic Center in Wilbraham, Massachusetts, for bodywork and paint, as his one-man shop isn't equipped for such work. "There was no major damage; a fender had been replaced, but it was a lousy body shop repair. There was no rust on the underside—if the main floors are rusted through, there are major problems, because that's very thick metal—although the body guy told me we'd need to replace that section under the seat. This car was good in other places that rust, like the front crossmember where the bumper attaches, the outer frame rails and the trunk floor, under the rubber mat.

"We contacted Mercedes-Benz, and amazingly, the part number for that floor section was still good," he continues. "If Mercedes gets enough orders for a part like that, they'll stamp out more of them. We waited for more than a year, though, and the order was still 'pending.' Eventually I

couldn't wait any longer, so we bought a \$12,000 3.5 Coupe for parts; it also had the bumper and many other parts needed to complete the restoration. On the Cab, there wasn't a single piece of rubber worth saving. These cars have \$1,000 worth of grommets on the firewall if you buy them new from Mercedes-Benz. You could go to the hardware store and find something that fits, but if you want to do it correctly, you'll want to use the grommets with the Mercedes part numbers."

The accident-affected fender and rear quarter panel skin were replaced with factory new sheetmetal—the latter being a complex job that was done in expert fashion—and the rear floor section was cut from the Coupe and expertly placed in the Cabriolet. Those repairs completed and the car stripped to bare steel, it was treated to a new basecoat/clearcoat finish in the original 906 color using the OEM BASF Glasurit paint system; this all-inclusive paint system is very expensive, with Gernold noting that a single gallon of some Glasurit paints can cost \$800. As expected, the paintwork was done to factory standards.

While the body was being perfected, Gernold sent the V-8 to the Mercedes engine specialty firm Metric Motors, in Canoga Park, California, for a full rebuild; this would eventually be reinstalled with a new wiring harness. He made a shocking discovery with the automatic: "I found that the transmission filter was original to the car—it hadn't been replaced in 30 years, and was full of sludge!" he says with wonderment. "Doing this level of restoration, I couldn't leave anything to chance, so I sent the transmission out to be rebuilt." He also rebuilt the front and rear suspensions, as well as the rear axle that had a cracked slip joint that is often overlooked.

The slow pace at which this restoration moved was a boon in other ways, the restorer admits. "A typical complete restoration takes about two years, but for various reasons I had more time for the assembly process with this project. When I get a car back from paint, I spray a protective wax like Cosmoline in all the cavities that usually rust. This time, I was able to let it dry and bond with the surface for a month or more; the stuff is self-healing, so if you break the paint when a screw or clip goes in, it will prevent the rust that eventually forms 15 years down the road."

The interior's leather, carpet and convertible top were the only areas where Mercedes-Benz itself didn't supply the new



**Because this 3.5 was stripped to a bare shell, there isn't one component that wasn't fully restored or replaced with a new OEM piece. The M116 V-8 was rebuilt in California and reassembled in Maine. There's an estimated \$1,000 in firewall grommets alone.**

parts. Gernold explains that numerous Mercedes parts sellers purchase their raw materials of leather, carpeting and more, from the same few companies in Germany that supply this industry. He purchased the seat upholstery kit—in Michael's chosen OEM light gray color, rather than the blue his car was built with—from GAHH Automotive, whose pattern offers excellent fit and finish. The seats, carpets and interior panels were installed by a Pebble Beach award-winning interior specialist from New Hampshire.

"Everything in the interior that is gray is

covered in leather or carpet. The instrument binnacle is wrapped in leather, and he knows where the cuts and seams go—his work is simply perfect. All the original rosewood trim was restored by Madera Concepts in Goleta, California, and that came out really well. Most restored 3.5s have burl—it was available at the time and most people like the look better—but it wasn't correct for this car," he muses. "The top was in lousy condition, and the wood in the frame was bad. Oldtimer Restoration Center in Harvard, Massachusetts, another expert in 3.5 restorations, restored the top,

and every piece of wood in it was remade, every piece of chrome replated. It cost \$20,000 to do that top alone—it's quite a job."

Chrome is the jewelry on these classics, and its prominence meant that Gernold purchased new pieces from Mercedes-Benz whenever possible, and had the rest rechromed, sometimes more than once, for a flawless result. The bumpers, window frames and bottom side moldings were among the major pieces rechromed, while smaller pieces like the headlamp and tail-lamp frames, orange front marker lamps and rear overriders (\$2,800 apiece!) were purchased new.

The fact that Gernold bought this car's required new parts—and sent others out for refurbishing—in the early years of this project would prove incredibly fortunate as time rolled on. "Some part costs have gone up tenfold in the years since I bought them, and others are no longer available," he explains. "When it comes to small items, you could always go to the hardware store and find whatever screw fits, but there's a difference when you put it together correctly.

"Many parts I found for this car were the last of their kind," he continues. "You need those parts, and that's why I now buy



everything at the beginning—otherwise you might end up telling the customer you can't finish a car because there are no taillamps. It's not easy to put a Mercedes-Benz together correctly, with the correct parts. If someone came into my shop today and said he wants to have a 3.5 restored, I would say, 'It will cost \$300,000. Drop off your car and \$100,000, so I can buy everything I know I'll need.'"

As the restoration was nearing completion, Michael came to the conclusion that this Cabriolet no longer suited his needs and lifestyle. "My children are grown; I live in Old Town Alexandria, and don't have a garage. By the time I'd spent \$40,000 on a paint job, I didn't want to park it on the

street. It was a car I wouldn't be able to enjoy anymore," he admitted. "Gernold told me a gentleman had been visiting his shop and watching his progress for more than a year. He liked my choices in colors and materials, as well as Gernold's perfectionist work. We had about \$250,000 into the car, including the purchase, and he and I came to an agreement that allowed me to get my money back.

"I was lucky," Michael says with a smile; "I was able to do a project that was on my bucket list, Gernold got to experience that, and in the end, I didn't have to hold the car for 10 years to get my money out of it, which is typical of a full-body restoration. In the end, I think [the buyer] made a very good investment because, at Scottsdale and other recent auctions, other 3.5 Cabriolets that were a step below ours in quality, have sold for more than \$400,000."

Gernold concurs. "You learn all the problems of a car when you restore one to this level, and every time I see a 3.5, I now look at all the areas I know to be problematic. It's an eye-opening project! Those auction prices are tainted—the result of two people going back and forth—but the true market value for that car is easily \$300,000, and that will only go up. For the most part, it worked out for everybody." 🌐

