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The Star

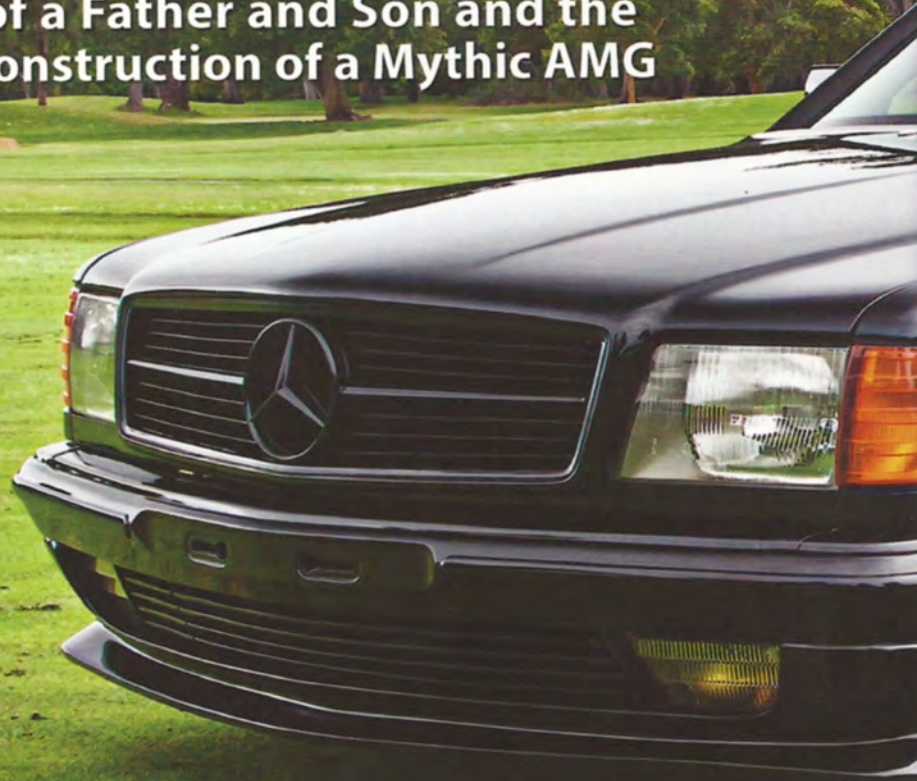
Mercedes-Benz Club of America

RETURN
of a **LEGEND**
Reconstructing an Early AMG

courtesy of 500Lboard.com

RETURN of a *Legend*

**The True Story of a Father and Son and the
Painstaking Reconstruction of a Mythic AMG**



The day is overcast but bright, illuminating a field of shiny sheet metal. One cluster of darkness, three cars, stands out in this bright gathering of pristine, colorful examples of Mercedes-Benz heritage. Within this exclusive group of three is one with an ominous stance, the dark mystery of its lines suggesting a unique story to be told.



In fact, the liquid black coupe crouching silently on the grassy hillside is the culmination of five intertwined stories. This tale begins years ago in Finland, then touches the home of Mercedes-Benz in Stuttgart and the workshops of AMG in tiny Affalterbach before finally reaching San Francisco and Los Angeles. But this isn't just a story of places; it is a story of people.



“Growing up, AMG posters lined my bedroom walls”

Three Generations and Mercedes

World War II was not kind to Finland. Transportation is key in every war and transport maintenance was critical for Jaako Nieminen, one of a small number of chief mechanics responsible for keeping the Finnish army mobile – a responsibility that continually honed and tested Nieminen’s skills.

In the years after the war, he passed on his practical attitudes and experience to his son Martti, who supplemented them with formal technical training. Then an old girlfriend spoke of opportunities in Americas.

Nieminen emigrated to New York in 1965 with nothing more than hope and his craft. It took him six months to save the plane-ticket fare to the states, and by the time he landed in New York, that girlfriend’s life had taken a different turn. Aided only with a letter in English describing his abilities and training – a letter written by a fellow countryman on his behalf – he found work at a small garage specializing in Mercedes-Benz cars. There he befriended another expatriate mechanic, Otto Meyer, a native German.

In the grand spirit of immigrants of previous generations, Nieminen, Meyer, and Meyer’s wife struck out for Seattle. But the Northwest didn’t feel like home and they soon headed south to San Francisco, where Meyer opened an auto salvage yard in the East Bay, specializing in Mercedes. Nieminen became a partner in a Mercedes service shop across the bridge in San Francisco.

Martti Nieminen is my father. He found a life and a Finnish wife on the West Coast, and I was born a few years after they were established in San Francisco. This is where I grew up and where he would pass on the mechanical skills and aptitude he learned from his father. When I was 15 years old, he presented me with my first car, a 1979 Volkswagen Rabbit diesel. It was straight, it was shiny, it was a black four-door hatchback – but it was missing one key element – The 48 horsepower engine.

Smiling and using his broken English, my father said, “You havit a year to figure dat out.” And for the months that followed I dove in head first. Fortunately I was able to find a rebuildable block, and with his tutelage and assistance, managed to get the little hatchback on the road. This was my first experience in restoring an automobile, the same car in which I passed my first driving test. My father and I later shared numerous restoration projects.

Martti retired in 2001, at the age of 60, and by then the seeds of my appreciation for German automobiles had taken firm root. Though I would make my career in film production, I treasured the skills and savvy passed down from my grandfather and father.

The mayor’s Car

Having ascended to the lofty position as mayor of Jackson, California, a gold-country town once mapped as Hangtown, Michael Spinnetti a close family friend, purchased a nearly new 1985 500SEC in 1986. This big, black-on-black Benz coupe seemed to him an appropriate vehicle for his new position, and soon the license plate read “Mayor.” Michael drove that car for 15 years into his retirement and through his move to Las Vegas.

From the start, Martti admired that coupe when Michael traveled down the hill to San Francisco. So when decided to let the car go, my father was first on the call list. He flew to Las Vegas and drove the coupe through Los Angeles to visit me and my Finnish wife Kaisa before heading home.

Time wasn’t too kind to the coupe, but the bones were there. When he arrived home, my father parked it in the back of the garage, vowing to bring the coupe back to its former glory as he found the time. That time never came, unfortunately, when my father lost a bout with leukemia five months later. And I lost my best friend.



Pages 30-31: Soon after its completion, Henric drove the car from Los Angeles to Monterey for its debut on the field at the 2011 Legends of the Autobahn. Opposite page: If anything, this car is more dramatic from the back, with the huge 315-35/17 tires hidden under the subtle flares, than it is from the front. Left: The AMG engine was put aside because the original 5-liter engine was in such great shape it seemed a shame not to continue using it. Nevertheless, Henric went over all the components to put the original engine back into concours condition while body work was being done. This page, below: The interior includes AMG components acquired over the years and all put back to original condition, combined with refinished and brand-new interior wood from Madera Concepts.

I knew what I had to do. I moved the mayor's old car to Los Angeles, and over the next several years I slowly began to go through it, tightening things up. Armed with a full set of factory manuals and Martti's old tool chest, I renewed the tired timing chain and tensioners, replaced the wrong idle control system with the accurate one, and ran through the standard litany of caps, rotors, valve cover gaskets, oil, filters, brakes, vacuum lines and connections. I couldn't help but be impressed with the quality and refinement of the 500SEC. By the time I had the coupe running perfectly, my passion for working on star-quality engineering burned brightly.

But enough was not enough, and soon my attention turned toward upgrades. With additional upgrades to the drive train, exhaust system, and suspension the car became our daily driver. In the next several years, we added significant mileage to the odometer, not only on L.A. freeways, but on many trips to San Francisco, throughout California, and to the high deserts as well.

During that time, I recalled the lore of performance and appearance parts that AMG produced for Mercedes cars. While growing up, AMG press-kit posters lined my room from corner to corner. But by this time, the price on its most exotic examples ran well north of \$100,000; an unobtainable mystique surrounded every example. At about the same time, I became increasingly active in a very small pre-merger-AMG crowd of enthusiasts, gathering and sharing knowledge through online Mercedes forums.

The Arizona widebody

Kaisa and I were scheduled for a long, hot-springs weekend vacation with friends in Saline Valley during Thanksgiving 2009, both of us looking forward for months to hot baths, campfires, and nights under the stars with good company and good beverages.



I'd been in touch with a fellow in Arizona who responded to one of my website "Wanted" ads for a rare, AMG muffler. Just before leaving for our long-awaited weekend, I learned the muffler my Arizona pal was offering came off a car in a junkyard, complete with a mysterious widebody package, as well as an AMG modified engine. How could that be? The pinnacle of 1980s German performance excess, a legend of the Autobahn, left to turn to dust in the Arizona desert.

The good thing about our destined desert retreat was that it was so isolated, there was no cellphone service. I asked my Arizona contact to grab as much of that car as he could – engine included, if possible.

As I later learned, a photo of a crude set of headers, removed from that very same wreck by an unknown troller, was posted online. Suddenly, the little secret treasure was a public auction. The entire coupe was up for the taking and the online threads caught fire, exceeding every viewing tally to date for the site. AMG elation, joy, excitement, anger, and threats of murder among friends filled the postings.

The good news was that, regardless of the coupe's fate, a handful of the good engine bits were already secured by my contact. Meanwhile, another movement took shape – a handful of fellow enthusiasts, aware of my interest in everything pre-merger AMG but unaware of my involvement with the coupe in the desert, were able to purchase the entire car on my behalf. This was an act of unexpected altruism for which I will always be grateful.

But even the photographs made clear that this car was a complete basket case. With no definite plans, I arranged for the car to be transported from Phoenix into storage in the desert east of Los Angeles until I could calculate my next move. The following March, I dragged the hulk – and there really aren't kinder words to describe it – home to Los Angeles. I began the in-depth dissection and research, and immediately verified it as a complete but badly deteriorated 1983 500SEC Coupe, fully modified with an AMG engine and widebody panel kit.

The Phönix and the Fire

As fate would have it, our week in the rugged Saline Valley had taken a toll on our own 500SEC. After bushes scratched their claws along the flanks of the coupe and the high crowned dirt trails took a toll on the underbelly, Kaisa and I decided it was time to push forward our tentative plans for cosmetic restoration. After some thought, and perhaps a bit of hubris, we mapped out a strategy.

We decided to dismantle both 500s. The widebody's AMG fender flares, valances, and rocker panels could be used to create molds for a new set of panels. Its other rare parts would be transplanted or used to create new parts for our old SEC. In the meantime, our old coupe would become the base from which to re-create the car that the desert hulk had once been. With the nature of the plan and the origin of the widebody, we gave our project a name: the "Rise of the Phönix" (the German spelling of "phoenix"). Out of the fires that would consume these two donor cars would arise a 500SEC AMG widebody coupe of legend, looking just as it might have in 1983 or 1985 when it thundered through Germany, a true legend of the autobahn.

However, I was not really looking for a new project at the time. With real trepidation, I wrote on the internet project thread I had established, "Projects are born every day. Projects are abandoned

The Phönix Project

Left to right: Our 1985 300SEC, during the trip to the Saline Valley. The 1983 Widebody in the junkyard in Phoenix with the top end of the engine removed. The Widebody arrives at our house and work begins. Items on the car, like the silhouette of the AMG 5.4 insignia, prove it is a true AMG.



Left to right: First project is to remove all of the parts of the body kit, using a sawzall and tools. One of the front fender pieces of the kit. With nothing left on the car, it was sold for scrap. Using the original parts, a set of molds made and used to produce all the pieces of the widebody kit.



Left to right: Our next task was to install the body kit on our 1985 300SEC. First task was to cut into the rear fenders. Then the rear wheel wells were expanded to hold the wider wheels and tires. The new rear fender pieces were screwed and riveted over the openings and the front fender pieces and skirts bolted in place.



Left to right: With the body kit pieces in place, seams and gaps were filled to make the fender lines smooth. Then the body was prepped for paint. Over a carefully prepared surface, several coats of 040 black paint and clearcoat were sprayed with each coat carefully sanded. The original 5.4 insignia was duplicated.



Left to right: Wider wheels were built by splitting and widening the correct AMG 3pc wheels and adding wider lips. With painting nearly done, all the other exterior details could be completed. The 5.4 SOHC AMG engine was completed and carefully stored away. The final step was installation of the AMG interior trim.





RETURN
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Legend





The blacked-out chrome was period AMG. Even performance cars in 1985 might have glossy burled walnut trim. The optional AMG speedo could have the customer's initials.

every week. Tens of thousands of dollars can be spent in the quest for perfection. With a mint you can print money, with an army you can fortify a village, and with a Visa card in the depths of the worst economic recession since World War II ... maybe not so much."

With an eye on a realistic budget, I decided that each major component of the restoration would be approached with an effort to offset the production costs. Instead of trying to build the perfect open checkbook widebody with necessary but no-longer-available components, we would make multiples of each of the pre-merger AMG parts we found. That way we could share the results of the project with fellow AMG enthusiasts. This approach ultimately offset the cost of the rebuild and put new life into other premerger projects.

The Rebirth

Reading the photo caption, you can see some of the steps that were taken to remove the panels, strip the car, pull new molds from the deteriorated AMG body panels, reassemble the car, install new panels, and finish the interior in proper fashion.

The journey was long and at times trying, but we did find solace when it came time to address the AMG engine. After all, a reasonable amount of time, effort and resources were already invested in upgrading our own SEC before this project began, and it was still

running perfectly. So, rather than pushing ourselves to install the AMG drivetrain on our chassis, we took our time and tediously rebuilt the AMG engine, documenting each step along the way, but then set it aside. When the current engine runs its course, we'll drop the AMG drivetrain into the car.

Given a project of this magnitude – I did mention the word hubris, I believe – the effort consumed much of our spare time from March 2010 onward. In addition to the disassembly and mechanical work I performed, there were suppliers to contact and coordinate, body shop installation techniques to develop, interior parts to be located, and so forth. I was intent on getting this exactly right, even to the detail of remaking the missing AMG 5.4 badge – of which only one known example exists in New Zealand – to go on the deck lid when the new drivetrain goes into the car.

By November 2010, one year from our fateful desert retreat, the project had progressed from taking things apart to putting things back together. The panels were completed, fitted, and attached to the body, and the painting had been finished. Now, for inspiration, we could walk into our own garage and look at the sleek contours of the car rather than relying on imagination and inspiration.

Through the next couple months, we created the interior of the car, working with craftspeople who were extremely talented with leather, wood, and upholstery. I swapped out the dash and upgraded the cabin to a complete, period-correct Alpine pull-out stereo system.

The history of AMG began 18 years before the 1985 500SEC pictured in this article was first produced. In 1967, two Daimler-Benz engineers, Hans Werner Aufrecht and Erhard Melcher, left the company to pursue a shared love for high-performance cars and motorsports. They set up a shop in the village of Burgstall an der Murr, near Stuttgart, to develop and produce racing engines.

They called their new company AMG, taking the initials of their last names for the first two letters, and then – for reasons that aren't very clear – adding the G, for Grossaspach, Aufrecht's birthplace. Within a few years, the company had built a race car to compete in endurance races and the European Touring Car Championship series. Built on a 300SEL chassis with a 6.3 liter V-8, the Red Sow – as it was named for its color and size – became the icon of the company and dramatically increased demand for its products.

By 1976, with the company building high-performance road cars for customers based on various Mercedes models, and developing and selling tuner products and accessories, most of the business was moved to Affalterbach, another small village just north of Stuttgart, leaving the racing engine development in Burgstall.

With the company's new lines of business moving away from his interests, that same year Melcher sold his share in the partnership to Aufrecht, but stayed in Burgstall to help manage the racing engine business.

In Affalterbach, the product line had expanded to include not only hand-built engines and custom cars, but also engine performance components, performance wheels, and body kits. These were the products that Henric Nieminen remembered from posters of his childhood and was interested in when he learned about the 1985 500SEC Coupe with a complete AMG engine and widebody kit in the junkyard in Phoenix.

In 1986, a few years after those components were sold, AMG produced its second iconic car, the Hammer sedan, a W124 E-Class with a highly-tuned AMG-developed 32-valve 6-liter 375-horsepower engine, the fastest passenger sedan on the road. Recognizing its growing importance to the Mercedes-Benz marque, in January 1999 Daimler Chrysler acquired a controlling 51 percent of AMG from Aufrecht, and in 2005, bought the remaining shares. The company, now known as Mercedes-AMG GmbH is still based in Affalterbach, producing hand-built performance engines and developing the line of AMG-branded high-performance automobiles sold by Mercedes-Benz.

Granted, it is satisfying to think of the work we completed as bringing a vision of power and elegance back to life. Equally, we're proud that a period of AMG and Mercedes-Benz history is coming back to life and we have had the chance to share our findings. During the pre-merger years, AMG was the black sheep of the brand. Engines and parts were produced in Affalterbach but then installed, often reluctantly, by local dealers and independent tuner shops. No records, technical data, or specifications of work performed during that period were kept by either of the co-dependent companies after the merger in 1999.

Consequently, it has been left to a small number of enthusiasts to keep alive the memories of those early years and create an awareness of the almost-forgotten legends of the Autobahn. We're pleased we've not only been able to add to that awareness, but to produce no-longer-available pieces that will allow others to fulfill their AMG restoration projects.

With the components and knowledge we have added to the pool of resources for pre-merger AMGs, we are proud to have made what we believe is a major contribution to resurrecting these legends of the Autobahn.

For additional information on the project and classic AMGs, visit www.mercedes-amg-classic.com.



Close-up the wheels look even more impressive. The warning reflector remembers the Nieminen Finnish heritage. Kaisa and Henric Nieminen are justly proud of their creation.

A Legend of the Autobahn

With completion in sight, we signed up for the second annual Legends of the Autobahn Concours to be held in Carmel during Monterey Classic Car Week – we would caravan from Los Angeles with some classic-AMG friends. That week, three scary-black Mercedes coupes cruising up the coastal highway got more looks than the Lamborghinis that preceded us.

The Phönix received some very pleasant attention on the field at Legends during its formal debut. By mid-afternoon, it was parked on a deserted fairway for the photos that accompany this article, and for the rest of the day, it was the subject of curious admiration by the crowds, most of whom had never seen a Mercedes-Benz this wide and, frankly, this menacing in appearance.

Soon after, the coupe received a wonderful response at an exclusive AMG event at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca in late September. In a sea of contemporary cousins, the old coupe was a surprising standout among the 70 or more AMGs in attendance.

As my wife and I flew back to Los Angeles after that event, leaving the car in the Bay Area to attend the San Francisco Bay Area MBCA event later in the fall before driving it home, we reviewed the project.