

ESCAPE ROAD

M-B 500K/540K roadsters

Cars so good that no single word can adequately define them

By Roger Barlow

The superlative that immediately springs to mind when contemplating these cars is "magnificent," but though it certainly fits, that word should, quite rightfully, belong solely to the Bugatti Royale. "Regal" deserves consideration but it isn't quite sporting enough for such dashing vehicles; it's more appropriate for a Rolls-Royce. "Impressive?" The 500K/540Ks are certainly that. But a V16 Cadillac, Duesenberg or Hispano-Suiza is also impressive without being in the same class as these Mercedes-Benzes.

They are certainly "beautiful," "elegant," too. As there has been no other car quite like them, "unique" can apply. "Sensational" is not entirely off the mark for they were that in the '30s, but this sounds too frivolous today. *Roger's Thesaurus* suggests we consider "grand," "splendid," "awe-inspiring," "noble" or "superb." Actually, as these roadsters seem to be all these things and more, one suspects that perhaps no one word quite defines them.

Although the bodies are the most striking aspect of these noble machines, let us begin instead with their underpinnings—the chassis. It was state-of-the-art in 1935 when this series first appeared as the 5.0 liter 500K. Many cars were still being marketed with semi-elliptic springs all around (Duesenberg, Jaguar and Bentley) or were flaunting their new independent front suspensions, but this and other M-B models had *all four wheels* suspended independently, usually by coil springs and A-arms at the front and swing axles at the rear. Swing axles eventually acquired a rather bad reputation for poor, even dangerous, handling as fitted to the VW Beetle, 4CV Renault and early Corvair. It was not even at its best on some of Mercedes' own sedans of the '30s where maximum comfort was more important than maximum roadability.

But as used on the 500K/540K roadsters where comfort was not the prime design goal, stiffer springs, shocks and restricted wheel travel enabled the simple swing axle layout to provide roadholding (and comfort) that could rarely be obtained

then with a conventional solid axle. In a bumpy corner at speed there was far less tendency for the rear wheels to "patter" and the tail to dance outward.

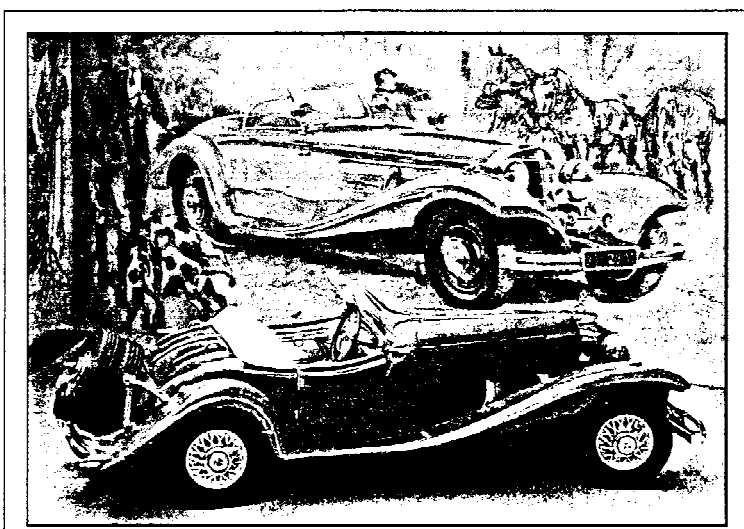
M-B had already built straight-eight side valve and pushrod ohv engines for some years as well as the ohc supercharged sixes

hearts of other motorists.

However, off-the-mark acceleration was not impressive because the blower could not be engaged while the car was in 1st gear, coming into action only above 25 mph. And as with the earlier "S" models, it was not supposed to be used for more than a few minutes at a time in the interest of longevity. But even without the blower in use the 540K roadster could cruise the autobahn with ease and silence at 85 mph in overdrive fourth, then furiously howl past anything else at speeds up to about 110 when the blower was brought into action.

The roughly 1000 cars of the entire 500K/540K production were mainly 129.5 inch wheelbase sedans and cabriolets weighing two and a half tons. The roadsters (and other two-seat coupes and cabriolets) were on a 117.5 inch chassis. Unfortunately, they still weighed almost 5000 pounds.

The roadsters (the 540K was actually a windup-window convertible) shared a few styling features with the big and rather clumsy sedans but virtually none of their style. Indeed, even though they shared the roadsters' handsome V radiator, flexible outside exhaust pipes and sweeping front fenders, the other short-chassis two-seat coupes and cabriolets never looked quite right either. Something about them seemed at odds



Barlow's 500K, though in mint condition, is worth only \$90: It's a model! Mural behind the model depicts sleeker but less dramatic 1937 540K

that powered its fierce and famous S, SK and SSK sports and competition cars. Now its new prestige line for the mid-'30s would have an engine with a little something from much of the recent M-B past.

The new 86x108mm 5.0 liter straight-eight (88x111 and 5.4 liters by 1936 as the 540K) had pushrod-actuated overhead valves. But it was the "K" aspect of this engine's specification that endowed it with the glamour that was uniquely M-B. Like the powerplants of the great "S" sports cars, this new engine had a driver-controlled *kompessor* or supercharger that blew through the carburetor when in use. These cars were usually driven with the engines normally aspirated, producing 100 and 115 hp respectively. When more acceleration or maximum speed was desired, however, the driver could put his foot down hard, beyond the normal full throttle position, to engage the Roots blower by means of a multi-plate clutch. This unleashed 160 Teutonic horses (at 3400 rpm) in a 540K, creating highway pandemonium as the roadster surged ahead with a banshee wail of the blower that struck terror and respect in the

with something else. Maybe the roadster was just an accident of birth, a breathtaking beauty in an ordinary family. Even now, 50 years later, the roadsters not only look absolutely right but have never been bettered.

The 500K body "flows" from bumper to bumper, but with its two large spare wheels mounted on the rear deck exactly where they belong esthetically, never pretends to be streamlined. The 540K roadster, without the cut-down door, may present a more pleasing unbroken body line blending into the tail when viewed from the side, but I do miss those two spare wheels!

Automotive beauty is, to a large extent, in the eye of the beholder. Nevertheless, there are certain basic elements of automobile design that seem truly deathless. These elements abound in the 500K and 540K roadsters. Seen beside today's cars with their characterless phony radiator grilles, efficient air ducts and full-width, slab-sided, low-drag bodies (even if Italian designed), these supercharged Mercedes-Benz roadsters stand out in all their traditional glory as the quintessential motor car.

Perhaps, in a word, superlative. ■