



GUIDING DER GROSSER

ROCK STARS, GENOCIDAL MANIACS, AND US.

The first thing you notice is the lack of fender flags. Guys like Idi Amin and Saddam Hussein tooled around in these beasts—blood on their minds and hydraulic seats under their *tuchis*—and their cars had state flags on the fenders. You feel slighted without flags. In a 600, you are enthralled by your own importance.

This is an oddly approachable steamship of a car—the twin-tone horn rattles windows like the *Queen Mary's* docking call—that shrinks around you. The steering is direct but wooden; the cockpit is impossibly simple. The massive V-8 rumbles indifferently until you hit the kickdown switch, at which point all hell breaks loose and a boomy, indomitable thunder pounds the fire wall. The wooden A-pillar trim looks like a woman's leg carved from zebrano; the hood ornament is as large as a man's palm.

Amin and company were bloodthirsty lunatics, sure. But *damn* if those guys didn't have taste. —SS

Grossery Store

> IN WISCONSIN, KARL MIDDELHAUVE KEEPS MERCEDES-BENZ'S DICTATOR SPECIAL, THE "GROSSER" 600, PARADE-READY.

ANCIENT GREASE

by SAM SMITH

IN 1966, Karl Middelhaue bought a Mercedes-Benz 300SE. When its engine blew up on Germany's autobahn, he had AMG install the 6.3-liter V-8 from a Mercedes 600 "Grosser" limousine. It was the beginning of a lifelong obsession. In the decades since, Middelhaue has become an internationally recognized 600 authority. The car long favored by celebrities and heads of state—from John Lennon to Idi Amin—is now catered to by a quiet, one-man operation in Wausau, Wisconsin. Just less than 2700 600s were built from 1964 to 1981, each with an air suspension and a complex hydraulic system powering everything from the windows to the cowl vent. Middelhaue has worked on or restored more than 200 of them. His shop, an 11-bay pole barn jammed with 19 6.3-liter V-8–powered vehicles, is a treasure trove of Grosser gold. We headed deep into cheese country for a closer look.

You own 11 600s. Why?

Are you secretly a deposed potentate?

I have asked myself this, too. The 600 is the most difficult car, I think, that Mercedes has ever built. It's a plumber's nightmare, but it's a timeless design.

You've also built a couple of El Camino–esque pickups from these things. Were you drunk?

I met [600 designer] Paul Bracq at a Mercedes meet in St. Louis about five years ago. At the time,

I had an El Camino SS, and I said to Paul, "Couldn't we build a 'Benzamino'?" He said, "Why not?" Three weeks later, I had drawings in my mailbox.

Are these usable cars or just monster relics?

They're very enjoyable. My wife and I have twice taken a cross-country trip in one. The second time was in a funeral car, the only 600 hearse built. I had a nitrous bottle behind the seat, and we drag-raced the car in

Portland. It weighed three tons and did, I think, 16.3 in the quarter-mile.

The average 600 certainly sees much less abuse, right?

It depends. Most examples on eBay need about \$50,000 to get them healthy. A new four-way, hydraulic switch for the driver's window is \$11,200. It adds up.

We tend to think of 1960s Benzes as indestructible, but the Grosser is a complex machine. How long will one last with proper maintenance?

The biggest problem is the comfort hydraulic system. As for the rest, the steel that's in there—I haven't seen a 600 where the rockers are rusted through. It just doesn't happen. The hydraulic switches are a poor design, but they last 20 years. How much more can you expect, really? I had one restoration customer who asked how long his car would last. I said, "Well, how old are you?" He said, "77." I said, "The car will be still running and you'll be long dead."

