



# CULTURE CLASH

**600 expert Karl Middelhaue isn't shy of making his own interpretations of classic Mercls but his latest takes the biscuit, writes Reed Hitchcock**

It takes either a madman or a genius to take what is arguably one of the finest luxury cars built in the 20th century – the Mercedes-Benz Grand 600 – and turn it into a pickup. In the case of the Benzomino, created jointly by Mercedes 600 guru Karl Middelhaue and famed Mercedes stylist Paul Bracq, it took both. I'm not sure, however, which is which.

We've met Karl Middelhaue in these pages before, and we learned about his brilliant experimentation with Mercedes M100-engined cars. He has built 6.3-litre coupés and cabriolets, a 600 Pullman Funeral Car, even a 300SEL 6.3 estate. He has also modified the 1960s-era M100 with modern superchargers, electronic ignition, and even digitally-mapped electronic fuel injection. Over the years he certainly has not let sensibility stand in the way of his creativity!

Middelhaue also has a weakness for vintage American iron. In the midst of his collection of Mercedes resides a lone

muscle car – a 1969 Chevrolet El Camino SS 396 car-pickup truck hybrid. The first time I met Karl, he pointed to a 600 shell in his workshop and said, "I'm thinking of making that one into an El Camino." We shared a laugh and that was that, until Karl met Paul Bracq.

## GREAT MINDS

Paul Bracq is best known for the timeless design of the W113 Pagoda SL roadster, but he is also the artist behind the 600. In June 2004, Bracq attended the annual meeting of the International M100 Group, and displayed a portfolio of concepts for creative and unique variations on some of his existing designs. Can you see where this is going?

"I was telling Paul about the car designs I love, and mentioned how much I liked the design of the El Camino, and how great it would be to have a 600 like that," says Karl. Bracq responded that Karl clearly had a fearless streak when it came

to the 600, having even designed and built his own 600 coupé, and that he should just take a chance and build it. Bracq even offered to assist. Within two weeks of their first meeting, Karl had received the initial Bracq renderings.

In all of Bracq's concepts, the basic 600 front section from the B-pillar forward was a common design element. However, back of that, Bracq experimented with variations in the design including deletion of the rear quarter windows, extension of the cab, different backlight profiles, varying length and height of the bed section, and even the rake of the tail section. The possibilities seemed limitless! In the end, Karl says, "I just went with the one I liked best."

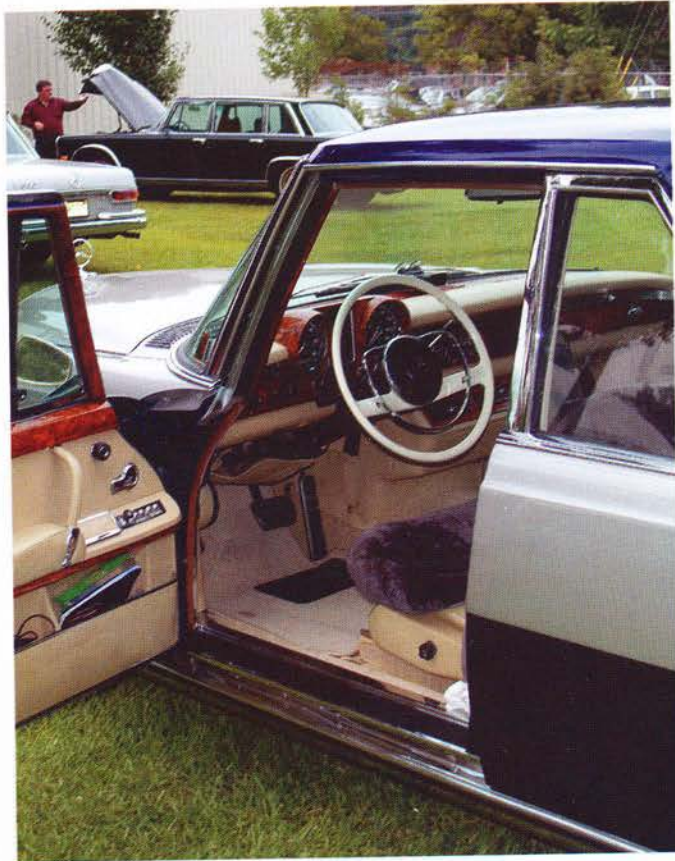
It seemed almost as if Bracq was a young man back in Nallinger's studio. Karl selected his design preference, and Bracq, in turn, set to work on full scale renderings

**Benzomino look almost conventional from this angle!**

**With Bracq on board, the conversion soon became reality.**



## PROJECT Benzomino Pickup



for the metal-crafters to work from to actually build the beast. In a matter of just a few short months the hand-built coachwork was complete. The car was finished in two-tone non-Mercedes metallic blue over silver, and the truck bed was lined in 1/8-inch diamond-patterned aluminium plate, giving it a finished but clearly utilitarian appearance. The Benzomino – part Benz, part El Camino – was born.

**It may be a pickup but the Benzomino's interior retains the elegance and grace of a 600.**

**"HE CERTAINLY HAS NOT LET SENSIBILITY STAND IN THE WAY OF HIS CREATIVITY!"**

### HEART OF THE MATTER

With the body in order, Karl turned his attention to the engine. Although he has probably more experience with extracting the absolute most from an M100 engine than anyone else on the planet, Karl chose to keep the

**Finished result is a far cry from the sorry state the car was in before the conversion.**



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## PROJECT Benzomino Pickup



◉ Benzomino powerplant stock for all intents and purposes. He began with a solid engine, installed a rebuilt Bosch injection pump, cold-start valve, and injectors, and mounted the whole assembly on one of his trademark front axles modified with W140 liquid-filled motor mounts to smooth everything out.

Completing the driveline, Karl installed a custom exhaust system with only resonators in line to give the Benzomino a sound and personality all its own – rough and ready, but still unmistakably Mercedes. The car puts its power to the pavement through massive BFGoodrich 255/70/15 radials wearing 3-inch whitewalls for added aesthetics.

Inside, Karl chose to retain a completely stock 600 appearance. He trimmed the interior in an elegant Mercedes Parchment leather and feintuft velour carpeting. From the captain's seat, one is hard-pressed to tell the difference between the Benzomino and a restored 600 SWB with a divider. In fact, it appears that the Benzomino actually has more front interior space than a divider car. Karl also retained the functionality of the 600's famous hydraulic door and window mechanisms, despite the deletion of the rear half of

**“THE BENZOMINO IS A FIRST DRAFT, BUT THEY WILL BE BUILDING A SECOND EDITION!”**



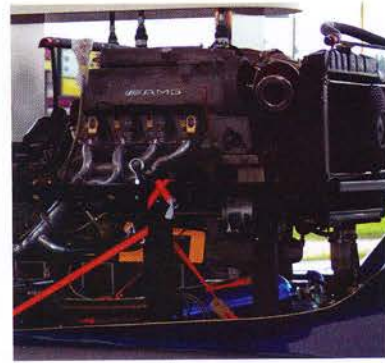
that system. Entertainment comes from a thoroughly modern Becker Mexico 2340 and Becker Silverstone 10-CD changer.

### ROUND TWO

On the road the Benzomino is a little louder than a standard 600, and feels much more tail-happy. That is, until it is loaded-down with cargo. In a recent road trip, Karl carried a rig containing a full M100 display motor strapped in the bed of the Benzomino. He reported that

**Clockwise from main: An unconventionally elegant design; the Benzomino is a true load lugger; hefty M100 motor didn't do wonders for handling.**

**Middelhaue (right) and Bracq examine the finished product.**



“over 70 it gets a little squirrely” and subsequently decided to ship the motor back home. He noted, however, that any 600 would probably feel like that with comparable cargo. I suspect he's right.

In a nutshell, Karl Middelhaue seems to have done it again and expertly executed a one-of-a-kind 600. But he's not done. This past summer Bracq and Middelhaue reunited for Bracq's first look at the Benzomino. They spent hours evaluating the finished product from every angle discussing which elements they liked and which they did not. At the end of the day the pair agreed the Benzomino is a first draft, but they will be building a second edition!

When last I checked, Karl had received the full scale renderings for El Benzo from Bracq. This time the car (truck?) will feature a sunroof, a sleeker tail, a custom Bracq-designed paint scheme, and some of Karl's favourite mechanical baubles including a turbocharger, computerised fuel management system, and a GM 440 transmission with torque converter. Grand ambition indeed!

