



Time Warp

Adding a car chase is Hollywood's time-proven method for rescuing a movie with a weak plot and sketchy dialog. Mustang fans have "Bullit," and Mercedes-Benz buffs have John Frankenheimer's "Ronin" with Robert De Niro shooting his way through Paris in a brown 450SEL 6.9.

For three decades, though, Ferrari buffs have claimed the best car chase film of them all, one that dispensed with plot and dialog, was one that, quite literally, cut to the chase. If you've not seen it, *C'était un Rendezvous* (known simply as *Rendezvous*) is one of the most exciting car films ever made. It is a spellbinding—and reckless—eight-minute tear through the streets of Paris at dawn—from the car's point of view. The car, with a camera attached to its front bumper, reportedly reached speeds up to 140 mph. There's no narration, just the constant roar and wail of a Ferrari V-12 accompanied by copious tire screeching.

Over the years, some had speculated that the Ferrari sound was dubbed in, primarily owing to some odd shift sequences here and there. Conspiracy theorists were proven correct two years ago, when film director Claude Lelouch revealed that the car he used to make the cult classic was not a Ferrari 275 GTB/4, as had been thought—but his own *Mercedes-Benz 6.9!* Sorry, Ferrari.

Though certainly not a vehicle for the Mercedes-Benz safety message, "Rendezvous" does show the 6.9's capability to good effect. A successor to the world's first four-door supercar, the Mercedes-Benz 300SEL 6.3, the 450SEL 6.9 was the pinnacle of the W116 series, combining brute power and handling finesse in a more sophisticated way than its esteemed predecessor had done. About 1,800 "six-point-nines" came to the U.S. from 1977-1980. Although some lament that we "only" got 250 horsepower and 360-lb. ft. of torque instead of the European version's 286 hp and 405-lb. ft., the car was no slouch.

Car & Driver writer Brock Yates, after driving a 6.9 from Manhattan to Road Atlanta

and making 40 consecutive high-speed laps, wrote: "This incredible machine had just been flogged for 100 miles on one of the most rigorous stretches of road to be found anywhere and it was now appearing to shrug its shoulders and await the next challenge!" Yates questioned whether even some of the world's best sports cars could have accomplished the same without suffering a mechanical malady.

The 6.9 had no peers when new, and only a handful of exotic cars made more horsepower at the time. The 6.9 excelled in price, too, costing over \$40,000 when it was introduced in the U.S. and rising by about \$15,000 through 1980.

Today, we are seeing a growing interest in the 6.9, and deservedly so. I think it truly is one of those cars you wish you could go back in time to buy. The Classic Center recently did the next best thing, acquiring a white 1979 6.9 with just 224 original miles!

As exciting as it is to have this car in our collection, along with a 1980 300SD with just 1,380 miles, such "time warp" cars pose a dilemma: do you restore it to a higher standard and compromise authenticity? Naturally, we will thoroughly photograph both cars to add to our knowledge base. As a reference point for restoration work, you simply can't beat an unmolested super-low-

mile car. No question about factory authenticity is left unanswered.

As it sits now, having been parked in 1980, our 6.9 is not roadworthy. Parts that deteriorate with time must be replaced. A layer of dirt embedded in the original Cosmoline protectant coats the engine compartment. A future owner may want the engine cleaned and detailed, but is that authentic? In addition to a full servicing, we'll have to open the engine and transmission and delve into the hydropneumatic suspension to make sure everything is ready to run and working properly.

This unique look back in time offers another view that, to some, is not as enticing. The 6.9 was certainly a milestone car. But much has changed over three decades and in terms of build and finish quality, the 6.9 could not match current expectations for a new Mercedes. The 6.9 didn't even have power front seats! Humans, not robots, spray-painted these cars. The wheel wells, for example, show an almost embarrassing amount of overspray from the semi-gloss black rocker panels.

I'll share more about "time warp" cars in another column. In the meantime, get a copy of "Rendezvous" and watch it with the sound turned down. And if you're in the Irvine area, visit the Classic Center to see this very special 6.9 before it's sold. •

