



Mercedes-Benz



Press Information

AMG in America Profile: Jonathan Hodgman

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“Speed kills,” or so you may have been told. Owners of pre-merger AMG models can be thankful that speed killed an earlier career choice for Jonathan Hodgman. His shop, Blue Ridge MB in Lilburn, GA, east of Atlanta, is today a hotspot for repair and restoration of “pre-merger” AMG cars. These are the models converted in the U.S. by AMG North America in the 1980s, before Daimler bought AMG and made it the in-house tuner for Mercedes.

Hodgman owns four such cars, including three of the most famous from the period, the Hammer. One of those is a unicorn, the only [Hammer wagon ever](#) made. He also owns a 1986 AMG 560 SEL with the 6-liter, 32-valve AMG engine also used in the Hammer. Hodgman’s daily driver is 2005 E55 AMG Wagon with no badging. (He likes fast wagons.)

But for his proclivity for fast driving, Hodgman, 39 (as of summer 2017), might have taken a very different path. Fresh out of University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, VA with a biology degree in 2001, Hodgman was ready to accept a job as a sales rep for a pharmaceutical giant. When a background check revealed his long history of speeding tickets, the company rescinded its offer. The same scenario played out with an Audi dealer when Hodgman and his girlfriend (now wife) moved to Atlanta. (Let this be a lesson to the youngsters who broadcast their traffic infractions on YouTube.)

To pay the bills, Hodgman took a commission-only sales job at a Mercedes parts specialist from whom he’d bought parts from while working on Benzes at his parents’ home in Virginia. Although he did not enjoy sales, Hodgman became the top salesman during his nine-month stint by offering tech advice to customers.

“I spent a lot of time on Mercedes forums, answering questions and giving advice,” said Hodgman. “If I didn't have the answer, I'd look for it. I had access to all the service manuals.”

Customers began asking Hodgman if he would wrench on their cars. He operated quietly out of his apartment's attached two-car garage, managing to keep the venture under the radar for three years. A small one-lane shop came next, and then he worked for eight years from a 2,400 sq. ft. shop. In April of 2017, Hodgman held a grand opening of a 13,000 sq. ft. shop with a two-acre parking lot and two other mechanics working.

Through Hodgman's prolific internet forum postings, AMG owners began to find him. He's had numerous customer pre-merger cars come through the shop, including a 1984 500 SEC wide body with the AMG 32-valve engine and a fridge in the back. A 1990 560 SEC he's working on is an AMG North America car with a hot-rodded SOHC 6-liter Mercedes V8 and full Nakamichi stereo.

“It's a Nakamichi mini rack-mount system in a car,” said Hodgman. “It cost \$25,000-\$30,000 when new. It's got monoblock amps, a cassette deck and a tuner and custom speakers. They still sound phenomenal. I make it a point to try and get Nakamichi head units with CD players.”

AMG in America: The Untold Story

The history of AMG is well-known; the true role of AMG North America is perhaps less so, buried in the pages of 30-year old car magazines. Hodgman has been collecting such literature for 15 years.

AMG, established in 1967 by Hans Werner Aufrecht and Erhard Melcher, former Mercedes engineers, became a successful Mercedes tuner by winning races. AMG's application of classic performance modifications – increased displacement, higher compression, aggressive cams, lighter connecting rods, reworked cylinder heads and intakes, and low-restriction exhaust systems – unleashed the great potential lurking within Mercedes engines. Brake and suspension upgrades drew from racing experience, yet AMG sought to preserve Mercedes drivability and comfort, a path from which it has never veered.

By 1976, the company had moved to a large facility in Affalterbach and hired its 100th employee, and by 1980, AMG was also offering custom exterior and interior options, including monochromatic paint schemes and plush upholstery. That year, Richard Buxbaum, whose Classic Motors in Westmont, Ill. imported, federalized and sold high-end European cars, set up a deal to sell AMG parts and cars in the U.S.

Buxbaum's operation converted many hundreds of Mercedes cars into fiercer AMGs. Aufrecht had dispatched several AMG employees to the Westmont operation, among them Hartmut Feyhl, who supervised technical work. Feyhl founded his own company, RENNtech, in 1989.

Feyhl's first job was to convert a 300E six-cylinder sedan into a pivotal AMG model, the Hammer. Kits shipped from Germany included everything needed to turn a mild-mannered E-Class sedan into a supercar-eating uber-sedan: the AMG-built 6-liter Mercedes M117 V8 with Melcher-designed DOHC 4-valve cylinder heads, along with a modified transmission and a slew of driveline, chassis and exhaust upgrades. An optioned-out Hammer could cost \$160,000 in 1987.

The car didn't originally have a name, until an American journalist commented that it was "as subtle as a hammer." AMG adopted it soon after.

"It was perfect," said Hodgman, "because hammer has the same meaning in both English and German."

The 355-hp Hammer offered supercar performance for the time, with 0-60 mph in five seconds and a nearly 180-mph top speed. AMG's US headquarters in Westmont, Ill built 13 out of the roughly 30 Hammers made, including the only wagon, which Hodgman now owns.

Hodgman and other aficionados consider only cars with the AMG 32-valve M117 engine to be true Hammers; others were later built with the Mercedes M119 DOHC engine.

Said Car & Driver in its December 1986 Hammer road test:

“This AMG-modified sedan keeps you completely at ease as you pierce the atmosphere like a horizontal bolt of lightning. All that's lacking is the stench of scorched sulfur from the shocked aftermath of your receding thunder.”

AMG cars attracted Hollywood and sports elite, who favored S-Class sedans and SEC coupes, the latter available with an exquisite wide-body conversion option. These big cars, too, were available with the full gamut of AMG performance upgrades, including the 32-valve engine or a hot-rodded Mercedes V8.

In 1988, Mercedes contracted AMG to manage its racing program. The motorsports connection initiated greater involvement between the two, and a cooperation agreement signed in 1990 allowed global Mercedes dealers to offer AMG cars and parts. As a consequence, contracts with existing AMG installers and dealers were ended, including AMG North America. Nevertheless, the momentum Buxbaum and company had generated in the USA would carry forward.

Inveterate Tinkerer

Hodgman had no formal automotive training. His father owned a concourse-quality Austin Healey restoration shop, but he did not work much there. He did, however, as a young boy, have a penchant for taking things apart.

“As I got older, I learned to put things back together,” Hodgman said. “When I was in the fourth grade, I had a small dirt bike that wouldn't run. The carb was gummed up. My father told me, ‘If you want to ride it, you have to fix it.’ I took it apart three times before I figured it out and got it going. Real-world learning is a good teacher.”

Even at that young age, Hodgman knew about AMG. His parents' home was always “full of car magazines.” Once he was in business fixing Mercedes, his interest in the 32-valve AMG engine grew, mainly because other Mercedes enthusiasts and mechanics cautioned him to stay away from it.

Nine years ago, he found a 1986 AMG 560 SEL with the 6.0-liter version that also powered the Hammers. The seller, in Texas, said the car “wasn't running right,” which for a 32-valve M117 should have been be a bright red warning flag to stay away. The car had an array of AMG options suitable for a “Miami Vice” drug lord, including full interior wood trim, Nakamichi stereo, phone and fax machine.

Hodgman bought the car for \$15,000 – \$3,000 of that borrowed from his parents. He flew to Dallas to drive it home, buying a basic toolkit at a local Walmart to first perform some basic service procedures.

When Hodgman transported the car to Atlanta, he started taking it apart, learning the intricacies of the 32V M117, along with its weak points. For one, he explained, the Melcher-designed three-piece heads were cast from a porous alloy.

“They love to leak,” he said.

AMG built the M117 in 5.0, 5.2, 5.4, 5.6 and 6.0-liter displacements. Early engines had 25mm cam bearings that were prone to seizing. Later engines have 27.5mm bearings that Hodgman said remedied the problem. According his research, AMG made 200-300 of the 32-valve engines.

“There are 32 valves and solid lifters with a shim-over-bucket adjustment,” he said. “It takes us two days to do a valve adjustment. It’s an ordeal. They made a tool for it. I was fortunate to be able to get one. Fixing these engines is expensive, but they run so sweetly when they’re all dialed in.”

Hodgman’s Hammers

Hodgman has learned that it pays to spend hours and hours on internet forums. He found his first Hammer that way. Or, rather, it found him, eight years ago. A West Coast seller who’d seen Hodgman’s posts called to offer a Hammer sedan, but not in one piece. The owner had taken it apart after its engine hydrolocked while driving in a rainstorm.

“He told me, ‘You really seem to be the guy who should have the car,’” said Hodgman.

The Hammer was delivered in pieces, but Hodgman said the seller had done an amazing job disassembling, cataloging, diagramming and packing all the parts. Hodgman worked on the car as time permitted, finally getting it together a year ago.

In 2010, he managed to snag one of the ultimate AMG trophies, the only Hammer wagon made, at a Barrett-Jackson Scottsdale auction. At the same auction, a Hammer coupe sold to a buyer from Canada.

“I was at my limit to get the wagon,” said Hodgman.

He remained in touch with the coupe’s buyer, however, selling some parts and offering maintenance tips over the years.

“About a year and a half ago, the man called and said he was retiring and had no room for the car,” said Hodgman. “He offered it to me for the same price he paid. That was good for him, because the exchange rate had changed in his favor, and so he was making 30 percent on his money. He even transported it to me. It needed some things, but it’s almost done.”

Hodgman’s Hammer sedan has 23,000 miles; the coupe has 29,000 and the wagon, which had originally been ordered by a Canadian buyer, shows 46,000 km. Hodgman said he has done mainly maintenance work on the wagon. Working on his three Hammers, he has noted the differences among them.

“No two are alike,” he said. “You could see improvements made along the way, like better brake line routing.”

As for parts availability for the pre-merger AMG cars, Hodgman says resourcefulness is key. “We have the gaskets and seals,” he said. He has had tool and die makers make some parts, as well.

Hodgman said he has seen a major uptick in interest in the pre-merger AMG cars in the last few years. It’s a small but growing community. Most owners are in their 40s and 50s.

“They remember the cars from the magazines,” he said. One customer, however, is just 23. Regardless of age, these AMG aficionados share another trait: “They’re very much into the history,” Hodgman said.

With values of the pre-merger cars rising, Hodgman is grateful for the buying opportunities he’s had.

“Some people thought I was crazy when I was buying eight or nine years ago. Now they think I’m a genius.”

If I Had a (Hammer) Wagon

The only Hammer wagon was an AMG North America creation. And it was not easy to build for the original customer, Paul Fingold, who ordered it for his wife, Malka. But the Fingolds were good customers and friends of Buxbaum, so he obliged. (AMG NA built a second wagon, called the Mallet, with a hotrodded Mercedes SOHC V8.)

The build began with a new 1987 300TD wagon, a diesel, since that was the only wagon variant available in the U.S. at the time. Fingold chose metallic blue with gray leather upholstery. The wagon received the full Hammer treatment, including the 6.0-liter DOHC M117 V8. The conversion required a custom-made exhaust using a Porsche catalytic converter. AMG’s tech specialist, Feyhl, handled the drivetrain swap, but an AMG wiring specialist was flown in from Germany to transplant a different electrical system.

Almost immediately after its completion, but prior to being delivered to Fingold, the Hammer wagon was trailered to a large gathering of AMG owners at Road America in Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin in June 1987 (featured on an episode of “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous”). There, the AMG crew discovered there wasn’t enough clearance for the custom-made headers, causing them to bang against the firewall as the engine vibrated at idle. They pulled the engine, and Feyhl climbed into the engine bay and pounded on the firewall with a hammer (of course!). Problem solved. It’s not the only sign of crudeness in assembly, according to Hodgman, who said the goal was maximum performance, not maximum beauty.

In 1992, Feyhl, who had started RENNtech in 1989, was wrenching on the Hammer wagon again – this time without a hammer. He performed a major service, installed new cams and made numerous other engine, chassis and body upgrades. The car was sold again through Beverly Hills Motoring and then put through the Barrett-Jackson Scottsdale auction in 2010, where Hodgman bought it.

The engine, with RENNtech’s mods, produces about 410 horsepower. Hodgman replaced the 3.27:1 axle ratio with a much more highway-friendly 2.24:1.

“With the 3.27, even on sticky tires, I’d liquidate the tires in first and second,” he said.

The 2.24 ratio gives 90 mph at 3,000 rpm, and third gear is good for 130 mph.

“If I keep it at 90 or below, I can get 19 mpg,” said Hodgman.

To view the petrolicious.com special on Jonathan Hodgman and his AMG Hammer on youtube.com, [please click here](#).

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