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Carlsson's version of the 5.5L AMG V8 produces 480 hp at 6,000 rpm and 480 lb.-ft. between 2,800 and 4,000 rpm. Torque is lower than AMG's standard 5.5L V8 Kompressor, but it's also one of the main reasons the CM55 K has two distinctly unique personalities. On the one hand, this generous supply of torque turns it into a jungle cat searching for its next meal. But, on the other it's really a pussy cat looking for another hit of catnip to help it relax. We'll take it either way...



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DO YOU KNOW that by 1850 German immigrants accounted for about five percent of the total population of Texas? By 1900, a stretch of land just northwest of San Antonio had become the hot spot for what is now known the world over as 'Texas Barbecue.' From tiny meat markets and butcher shops turned sausage factories and smokehouses, to a multi-billion dollar industry some 100-or-more years later, Germany has arguably had a greater impact on American cuisine than any other country in the world. While our hearts haven't always been able to express compassion in the face of this reality, our stomachs have certainly become accustomed to these types of foreign influences.

You could argue the Chinese didn't invent pasta, or that hamburgers weren't originally from Hamburg, but it would be pointless. And, if there was only one other area of influence that Germany has had on us as North Americans, it has to do with cars. The truth is that Germany is known for turning out nice cars like the earth is round. Whether an Audi, BMW, Mercedes, Porsche or some other lesser marque, their engineering, technologies, production capabilities and quality have always

been at the top.

BMW is now the undisputed biggest carmaker in Germany, but Mercedes-Benz has always been either fighting for, or occupying that top spot. And, similar to the Italian Lamborghini vs. Ferrari rivalry, enthusiasts on both sides have been rewarded with some ferociously competitive cars like the BMW M3 or M5, or any Benz wearing an AMG badge. From the early days through to today, people who want to change their car and make it look or perform better than when they bought it have always existed. What began as a cottage industry for a few German car nuts here and there has since turned into a full-service automobile tuning industry with dozens of different players.

One of them on the Mercedes side is Carlsson Autotechnik GmbH of Merzig. For more than 16 years, brothers Rolf and Andreas Hartage have been making German cars better at their 166-year-old "Gut Wiesenhof" manor in southern Germany. By combining high-quality craftsmanship with first-class technology and innovation, their efforts have paid off in many ways. One such way is that Carlsson is now considered a complete car builder (or secondary manufacturer) by the

German government. It's an excellent distinction to have; but you're still wondering where the company gets its name, right? Well, that's easily attributed to former Mercedes Works driver and Swedish WRC rally pilot Ingvar Carlsson, who is an important development partner for the business.

At a recent press event in Hockenheim, Germany, I had the pleasure of driving one of Carlsson's latest offerings. Based on the 2005 Mercedes SLK55 AMG, the Carlsson CM55 K was first presented at the most recent Essen Motorshow where it captured a lot of attention, including our own. But, not until recently did we have the opportunity to experience it in real-life driving situations. Now we have, and what an experience it turned out to be.

Like a wild cheetah chasing prey across the Savannah, the CM55 K accelerates from a standing stop to 100 km/h in just 4.1-seconds in total comfort. In contrast, it's equally adept at pulling softly and quietly away from intersections like a lackadaisical domestic house cat. Being able to nonchalantly come up to a speed in this car without feeling overwhelmed or intimidated by its power was a pleasant surprise, especially when you consider the engine in this car is based on AMG's

Typically, screw-type superchargers cause the torque to jump immediately up to the maximum level before trailing off throughout the rest of the operating range.



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powerful 5.5L 24-valve SOHC V8 (not the Kompressor version) that's found in the SLK55 AMG. Normally, this is a no-nonsense engine that can punish even seasoned professionals; however, Carlsson has managed to tame the beast with its own version of the V8 kompressor. Bear in mind that the SLK350's standard 3.5L V6 makes 355 hp at 5,750 and 376 lb-ft. of torque at 4,000 rpm. The one in the CM55 K is a monster in almost every respect.

"Here we have attached a vacuum compressor on it," says Stefan Müller, Carlsson's enthusiastic assistant marketing manager and most veteran employee (12 years and going strong). Müller is now the go-to guy when it comes to getting answers as well as seat time. This unique kompressor was developed in concert with Ogura Clutch Co. Ltd., a Japanese company known for clutches that can withstand extreme street and racing use. "We prefer this compressor concept over the traditional screw-type compressor," says Müller. He explained that, typically, screw-type superchargers cause the torque to jump immediately up to the maximum level before trailing off throughout the rest of the operating range. Carlsson's highly-efficient (up to 70%) vacuum-type system, which

is being built under license by Wankel, differs in that it delivers its power smoothly throughout the entire range thanks to an ultra-efficient intercooler that's part of the unique air intake manifold. Plus, there are numerous other modifications inconspicuously installed beneath the nifty Carlsson engine cover that lend a hand.

Already equipped with the AMG valve-train, crankshaft, lightweight cams, reinforced block, pistons and connecting rods, Carlsson beefs up the cooling system with a new radiator to supplement the intercooler's duties. Also installed are sporty air filters, dual water pumps, an expansion tank, special thermostat housing, V-belt, fuel injectors and a high-capacity clutch assembly by Ogura. The compressor system itself is lightweight, quiet, durable and offers immediate response to driver inputs and, in the end, achieves some quite astonishing power figures. Carlsson's version of the 5.5L AMG V8 produces 480 hp at 6,000 rpm and 480 lb-ft. between 2,800 and 4,000 rpm. Torque is lower than AMG's standard 5.5L V8 Kompressor, but it's also one of the main reasons the CM55 K has two distinctly unique personalities. On the one hand, this generous supply of torque turns it into a jungle

cat searching for its next meal. But, on the other it's really a pussy cat looking for another saucer of milk to help it relax. At any rate, Carlsson's exhaust system, which includes a dual stainless steel sport muffler that terminates at four oval tailpipes embossed with the company's running horse logo, comes with a powerful note as well as complies with Euro 3 and D4 emissions standards.

Using its proprietary C-Tronic engine control unit, Carlsson tunes all of its engines for additional power without sacrificing fuel consumption or negating their excellent emissions status. "Here, we made the decision to put the torque curve together with the line for horsepower so the torque comes on more smoothly," Müller explains. "You can go with that very comfortably," he says, adding "If you want to go fast it works very well too." I can and will attest to this; and, although I came nowhere near this car's 310 km/h top speed (the old 215 km/h maximum has been removed), I did manage more than 210 km/h on the Auto-bahn and felt really comfortable doing so. After schussing down highway on-ramps to join up with moving traffic, simply stomping down on the accelerator gives instantaneous and almost scary passing power.



THE DETAILS

2005 CARLSSON CM55 K

WHEELS, TIRES, BRAKES

(r) Carlsson 19x10-in. 1/16 Ultra Light 1-pc. forged alloy wheels; 265/30ZR19 Dunlop SP 9000 tires; (f) Carlsson 19x8.5-in. 1/16 Ultra Light 1-pc. forged alloy wheels; 235/30ZR19 Dunlop SP 9000 tires

EXTERIOR

Carlsson body kit (front bumper w integrated lip spoiler & fog lights, side skirts, rear bumper valence, trunk lip spoiler); badges

INTERIOR

Carlsson (two-tone Alcantara leather reupholstered interior, stainless steel roll bars, safety glass wind deflector, polished door sill plates, sport steering wheel (airbag included), e-brake handle, shift knob, floor mats, aluminum pedal set)



The Carlsson front bumper features a built-in lip spoiler, fog lights as well sizeable air inlets that disguise the intercooler residing in front of the engine.

Gear shifts with the AMG 7-speed automatic transmission I drove were quick and subtle – barely even noticeable – and there was no tire chirping either; just loads of traction and acceleration, which equates to plenty of confidence when you need it the most.

As eluded to, the handling is another area where the CM55 K impresses. Fully compliant, the package here consists of four Bilstein competition dampers working in conjunction with a set of Carlsson competition springs. The Carlsson RS suspension lowers the car's center by about one inch and comes with threaded dampers that offer variable ride height adjustability coupled with nine different spring rates to help make this formidable

high-performance machine even more so at the track. But, you just can't look past the fact that this car is just as suitable for dropping off your kid at school or grocery shopping as it is terrorizing a circuit like Hockenheim. It does both extremely well and the handling is more neutral than you would expect from a rear-wheel drive roadster. But, if putting the pedal down and power sliding around corner apexes is your thing, simply turn off the traction control and the CM55 K will oblige until your heart is content.

The wheel and tire package combines refinement and technology to produce uncompromising performance that is so often difficult to achieve. Here, the link to the driving surface is provided by four

of Carlsson's 1/16 Ultra Light 1-piece forged alloy wheels surrounded by Dunlop SP 9000 ZR-speed rated tires. These wheels are significantly different from other German Mercedes-Benz tuners, which have largely stayed away from the 1-piece forging process, and account for a 50-percent savings in weight over many other conventional light alloys. The result is improved handling, stability and overall driving comfort. The UL's 16 tapered spokes and detailed engraving encircle the center cap, while a hand-polished and varnished finish protects their distinguished yet sporty look. The 19x10-inch rear wheels are paired with 265/30 series rubber and a +33 offset while the 19x8.5-inch fronts are outfitted with their

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SOURCEBOX

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SPECIFICATIONS

2005 CARLSSON CM55 K

ENGINE

AMG 5.5L SOHC 24-valve V8

ENGINE MODIFICATIONS

Carlsson (vacuum-type compressor system, front mount intercooler, intake manifold, upgraded cooling system, sport air filters, dual water pumps, expansion tank, thermostat housing, V-belt, fuel injectors, dual stainless steel sport muffler w quad oval tailpipes, engine cover)

ENGINE MANAGEMENT

Carlsson C-Tronic ECU

DRIVETRAIN

Ogura clutch

CHASSIS, SUSPENSION

Carlsson (RS adjustable suspension w Bilstein adjustable dampers, variable rate springs)

NUMBERS

Horsepower: 480 hp @ 6,000 rpm;

480 lb.-ft. of torque @ 2,800-4,000 rpm;

Acceleration: 0-100 km/h = 4.1 sec.;

Top speed = 310 km/h



235/35-sized counterparts and an offset of +28. Upgrading the AMG brakes doesn't seem to be a priority.

'So far so good,' wouldn't you say? Well, check out the aerodynamic body kit Carlsson has developed for the SLK. You should notice the new front bumper, which features a built-in lip spoiler, fog lights as well as sizeable air inlets that disguise the intercooler residing in front of the engine. The bumper also comes with provisions for increased brake cooling while side skirts present a dramatically different shape from front to the rear. The sides can be fitted with a rear axle brake cooling duct should one be necessary. Further back, a subtle trunk lip spoiler helps reduce lift along with the diffuser that is integrated into the new rear bumper valence. All of this works together to produce a high-class appearance that functions as well as it looks. To go along with the rear Carlsson badges, a horse logo plaque is also available to

replace the big Benz badge on the nose. I'm giving high marks for making an awesome-looking car look even better, but there's still more to see.

With the SLK's electric power top in the down position, bystanders gawk at the stainless steel roll bars and safety glass wind deflector that shows off a laser-etched Carlsson logo. This nice touch, however, is a mere prelude to the breathtaking interior treatment my test car was treated to. Opening the doors revealed polished door sill plates to step on or over while getting in; but, the main difference here is that the tiny cockpit (which to me seemed like it could feel cramped to taller or larger individuals) is reupholstered in soft platinum gray and anthracite-colored Alcantara leather with a quilt-like pattern that adds depth and texture to the interior. You'll find this luxurious treatment on both seats and door panels with matching accents on the center console, e-brake and airbag-

equipped sport steering wheel. Above the badged floor mats is an aluminum pedal set for increased response and feedback.

Whether you're a fan of roadsters or not, a Mercedes-Benz enthusiast or otherwise, the Carlsson CM55 K is one vehicle that will make you think twice. I'm already planning a route for my next visit to Germany. Given the choice between the SLK55 AMG Kompressor or Carlsson's version of it, we'll gladly pick this the CM55 K every time for the simple fact that it drives however you want it to. If you want a road-melting monster-of-a-roadster with insane performance abilities, this is your car! If you desire a comfortable cruiser for urban streets and highways, this is also your car! In my mind it offers the best of both worlds. Oh, and if you like this car, just wait until Carlsson unleashes its newest tuning program for the Mercedes CLS class as well as the upcoming M class. They will surely be something special. **MILE**