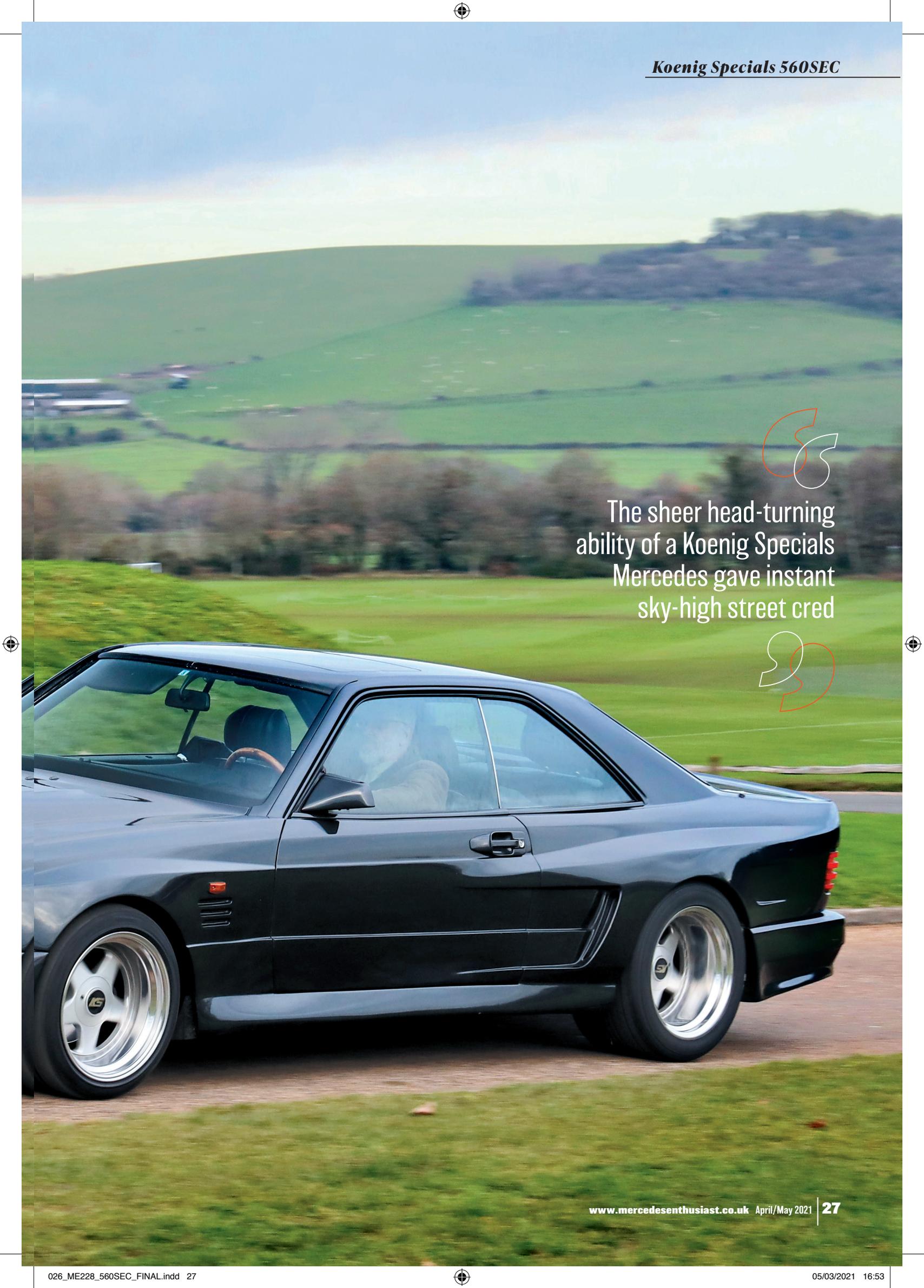


# The Koenig and I

Back in the 1980s things didn't get much wilder than the Koenig Specials modified Mercs, and we've tracked down a survivor to remind ourselves why

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The sheer head-turning  
ability of a Koenig Specials  
Mercedes gave instant  
sky-high street cred





◁ The huge arch extensions were a lot of work to fit.

**T**he 1980s was a decade of glorious excess. Fuelled by oil money, a burgeoning property money and the ‘greed is good’ mantra encapsulated by the 1987 movie *Wall Street*, the 80s left behind a culturally unique legacy across art, music, fashion, and the car industry.

The 80s gave rise to a phenomenon in the aftermarket tuning and custom car industry where many bespoke cars with avant-garde design, engineering and luxury features saw the light of day. Some of these unique vehicles quickly achieved cult status, while others stood out for their dubious aesthetics. While Uwe Gemballa undoubtedly created the wildest looking Porsche-based cars on the planet at the time, Willy Koenig stood head and shoulders above anyone else for the most visually impressive Mercedes-based creations.

Given that showroom Mercedes-Benz models were still suffering from a slightly stodgy image at the time compared to BMW and Porsche, the sheer head-turning ability of a Koenig Specials Mercedes gave instant sky-high street cred.

The Koenig Specials widebody style was the brainchild of Vittorio Strosek, who transformed the Ferrari 365BB that Willy Koenig was campaigning in local Ferrari Club races. A graduate of the Wuppertal automobile design school, Vittorio did his apprenticeship with the legendary automotive and industrial designer Luigi Colani, who passed away in September 2019, aged 91.

I first met Vittorio Strosek and Willy Koenig back in 1984 when Koenig Specials had just rolled out its widebody conversion for the R107 SL. The C126 conversion that followed soon afterwards really took the world by storm, and when movie star Sylvester Stallone bought one, it really put Koenig Specials on the map with the rich and famous.

Back in 1986, I photographed the first UK registered right-hand drive Koenig SEC, which had been commissioned by a customer in Essex. This was also the year I first met Peter

Qvortrup, a Danish national living in the UK who owned Audio Innovations, a Brighton-based company that designed and manufactured audiophile valve amplifiers.

Peter later went further up market with the Audio Note brand, which he still manufactures today at his factory in Partridge Green, West Sussex for export all over the world. Incidentally, the flagship models of these fine amplifiers cost as much as a new Mercedes-Benz S-Class!

Peter has been a Mercedes enthusiast as long as I have known him, and his first Mercedes was a 123-series 240 TD manual, which he bought in 1986 with 28,000 miles on the clock. He parted with this car five years later after racking up 285,000 miles all over Europe on company business.

An ardent fan of the simple, robust engineering of 1980’s Mercedes, Peter feels that anything built after the mid-90s is too complex, with too many electronics. He also considers the S124 to be the best estate car ever built, so it is no surprise that the ‘youngest’ car in his small fleet of 26 Mercedes is an E36 AMG T-model. The only ‘newer’ Mercedes he owns is a 2001 Brabus G500 5.8.

To help keep that Mercedes collection growing, Peter has a good contact in Japan who looks out for interesting cars for him. The Japanese do not salt their roads in winter, so the cars there are in much better shape than

their average European counterparts. He even managed to find a really nice AMG 560SEC 6.0 for Peter, which he recently sold for a not inconsiderable sum. But his 1991 Koenig Specials 560SEC was the very first Mercedes that he imported from Japan. “Back in 2013, I was looking for rare AMG models and had never heard of Koenig Specials,” he recalls. “My contact in Tokyo offered me this car, which I thought looked really cool, and the 2.4-million Yen price tag was only £18,000 at the time.”

## The C126 conversion took the world by storm and when Sylvester Stallone bought one it put Koenig on the map with the rich and famous



▽ Unusual wing mirrors were part of the package.

◁ The front wings are a one-piece design.

Once Peter had the car taxed and registered in the UK, he began to go through it with a fine-toothed comb, renewing anything that had suffered the ravages of time. For starters, the front suspension was completely rebuilt with new wishbone and anti-roll bar bushes, and spring pads. At the rear, all of the trailing arm bushes, subframe and differential mounts were renewed.

The Koenig Specials widebody styling kit was fitted by Koenig in Munich. Unbolting the standard front wings and replacing them with the one-piece wide-arch mouldings was the simplest part of the conversion. Fitting the rear arches was much more complex and labour intensive, requiring the metal around the arches to be surgically removed to accommodate the much larger wheels and tyres. The exposed bare metal was rust-proofed and new bespoke inner arches were fitted to keep out road dirt ▷





Owner Peter has a collection of modern classics.



◁ KS badging suited the outlandish look!

◁◁ The Koenig Specials name became famous.

△ Understated colour hides how wide it really is.



Subtle rear lip spoiler is part of the rear arches.





◁ M117 V8 was modified to produce 400bhp.

▽ Rare Albrex supercharger required a rebuild.



▷ and debris. Then the fibreglass extensions were bonded on, and many man hours of filling and sanding was required to prepare the surface for undercoating and painting.

The outer sections of the integrated rear spoiler also form part of the new rear wing panel mouldings. The centre section is bonded to the trailing edge of the bootlid and blended to create the neat extended look that also helps to reduce lift at speed. Deeper side skirts join the more purposeful and aerodynamic front bumper and matching rear valance.

**H**owever, the passage of time had taken its toll on the car since it was built, but Darko Greguras, Peter's Croatian technical manager at Audio Note UK is a serious car enthusiast, and took charge of obtaining all the necessary parts, as well as supervising the restoration work. For a start, as fibreglass and metal expand at different rates, it was no surprise that some cracks in the filler had appeared over time in the blue-black (199) metallic paintwork. The car also did not feel like it was producing the claimed power, and it was found that the Albrex supercharger conversion that takes the 5.6-litre M117 V8 motor to 400bhp was only producing 40 per cent of its boost pressure. So Darko got in touch with Conrad Gruber at Albrex, who assisted in getting the supercharger back to its normal health. The ECU also had issues, so a new one was

sourced from the US and reprogrammed to suit with the correct parameters. Finally, to cope with the demands of today's denser traffic, Peter commissioned a larger capacity radiator to cope with summer touring in Europe.

This supercharger conversion was designed over three decades ago to work with the primarily mechanical Bosch KE-Jetronic system and is governed by an ECU with very rudimentary control parameters by today's standards. Despite this, the result is impressive and the engine fires up instantly, idles steadily, and pulls away without a stutter. The old four-speed mechanical auto transmission is typically slow-witted and not the smoothest of shifters, but if you control the gears manually you can make it do your bidding with reasonable responsiveness. That said, the blown V8 has so much mid-range grunt that you only need to take control when pressing on. In terms of sheer straight-line performance, the supercharged Koenig Specials SEC is rapid even by today's standards. However, it is not the sheer

horsepower but rather the smooth and progressive mountain of torque produced by the 400bhp supercharged 5,547cc V8 that impresses. The mailed fist in a velvet glove character makes it an autobahn stormer par excellence, and Peter recalls how not many modern cars short of an Audi RS6 could get past him on the unlimited motorways of Germany. ▷

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## Koenig Specials 560SEC

▷ On the country roads around Audio Note's HQ, I had the epiphany that while the SEC was considered a big car in its heyday, its compact size compared to its modern equivalent makes it easier to position on country roads, despite this example being left-hand drive. That is just as well since the recirculating ball steering shared with all Mercedes models of its era is not the last word in precision. If anything, the uprated chassis highlights the muted inputs of the tiller, which in typical period style has to be moved an inch or so away from the straight ahead before it shakes hands with the front wheels. But once committed to your chosen cornering line, the Koenig SEC is stable and confidence inspiring. Beyond the new rubber

The blown V8 has so much mid-range grunt that you only need to take control when pressing on

### Rolling out

Those huge wheelarch extensions require big wheels to fill them, but here they're positively filled to the brim by bespoke, three-piece modular Koenig Specials wheels made by OZ Racing. They measure a wholesome 10 inches wide at the front and 12 inches at the rear, both 17-inch in diameter. These are shod with 255/40ZR17 and 335/35ZR17 Pirelli PZero rubber, and look twice as wide as the skinny 215/65R15 footwear of the standard 560SEC!



▷▷ Wood trim was the epitome of class and style.

▷ The 300kph speedo signified the car's ability.



bushes, the suspension was given a set of Koni Classic adjustable front struts and rear dampers, and the uprated Koenig H&R springs swapped for a set of modern H&R replacements to improve the ride on British roads. Our test drive confirmed that this combination makes for a comfortable ride, despite the huge steamroller wheels and tyres, but Peter has since had the original Koenig springs refitted and the Koni dampers recalibrated for softer rebound settings and is happy with the crisper handling.

And yet this does not really matter because you cannot legally extend a 400bhp car on today's crowded roads, so the real upside of the supercharged V8's fat torque curve is the waftability that lets you arrive at your destination totally unstressed. Along the way, the Koenig SEC turns heads, but more from curiosity than the envy sometimes stirred up by modern supercars. This attention might even make you feel like royalty as you rumble past, which would be quite appropriate given that Koenig is the German word for King!

