HAGERTY

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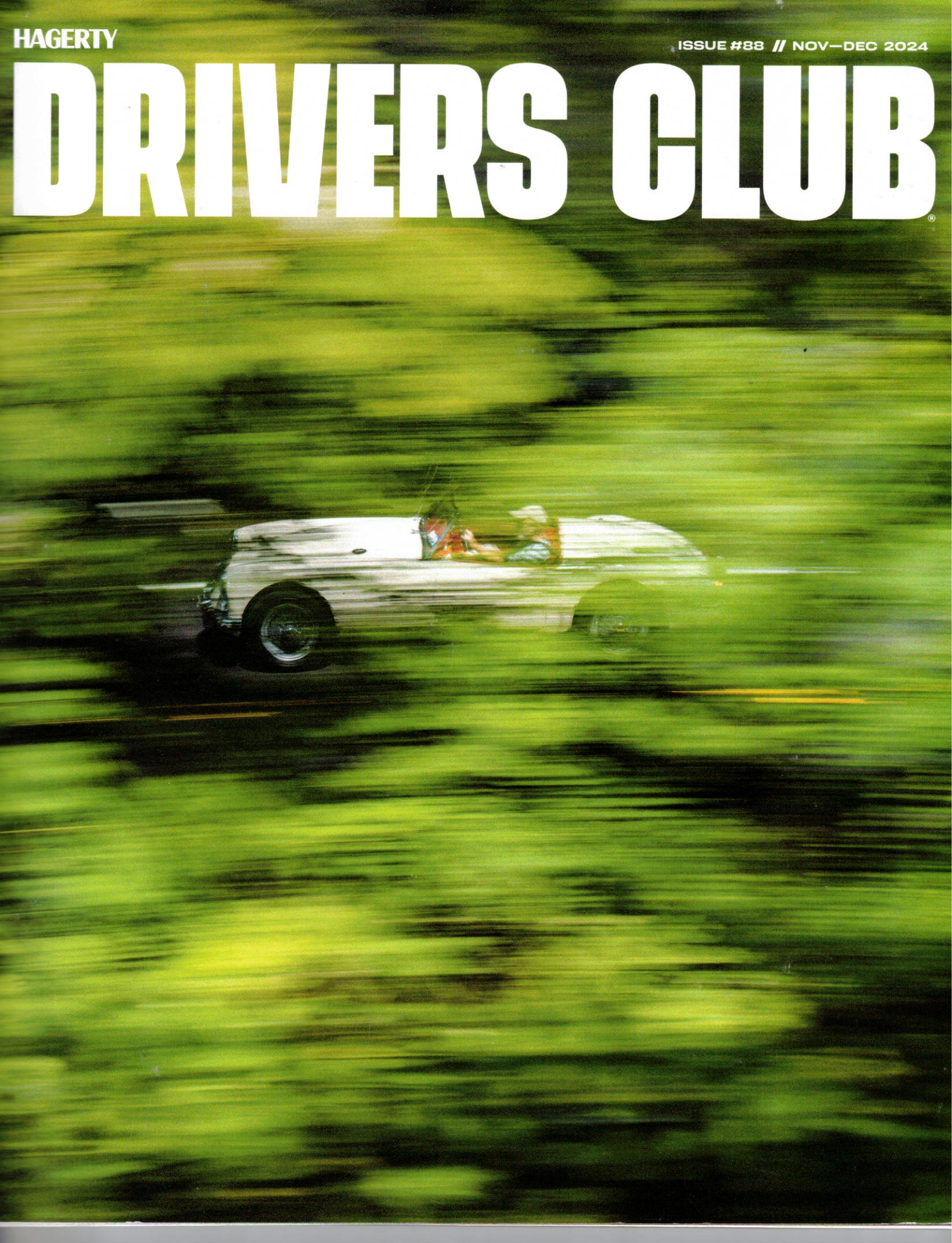
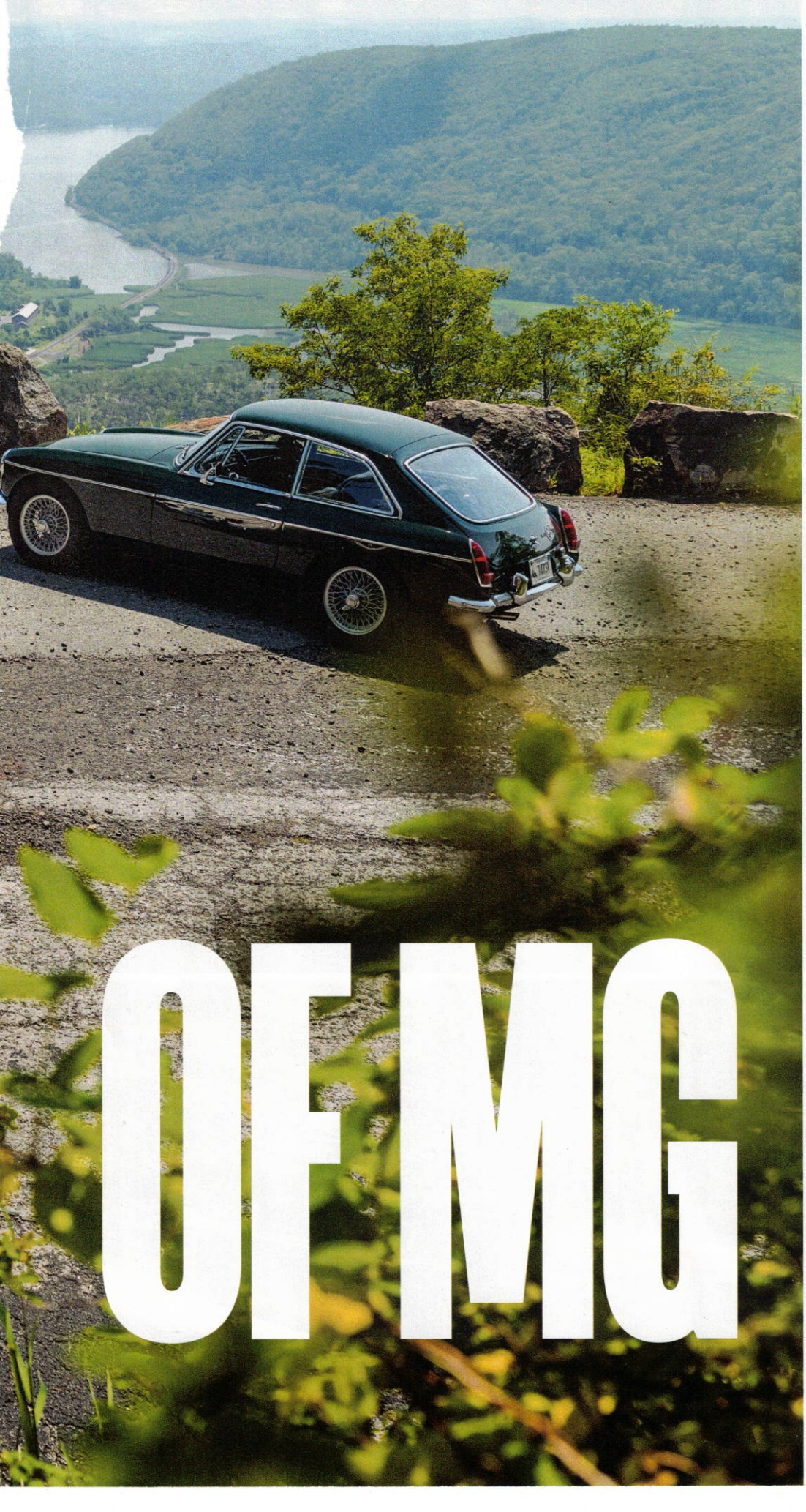


100 YEARS



OF MG

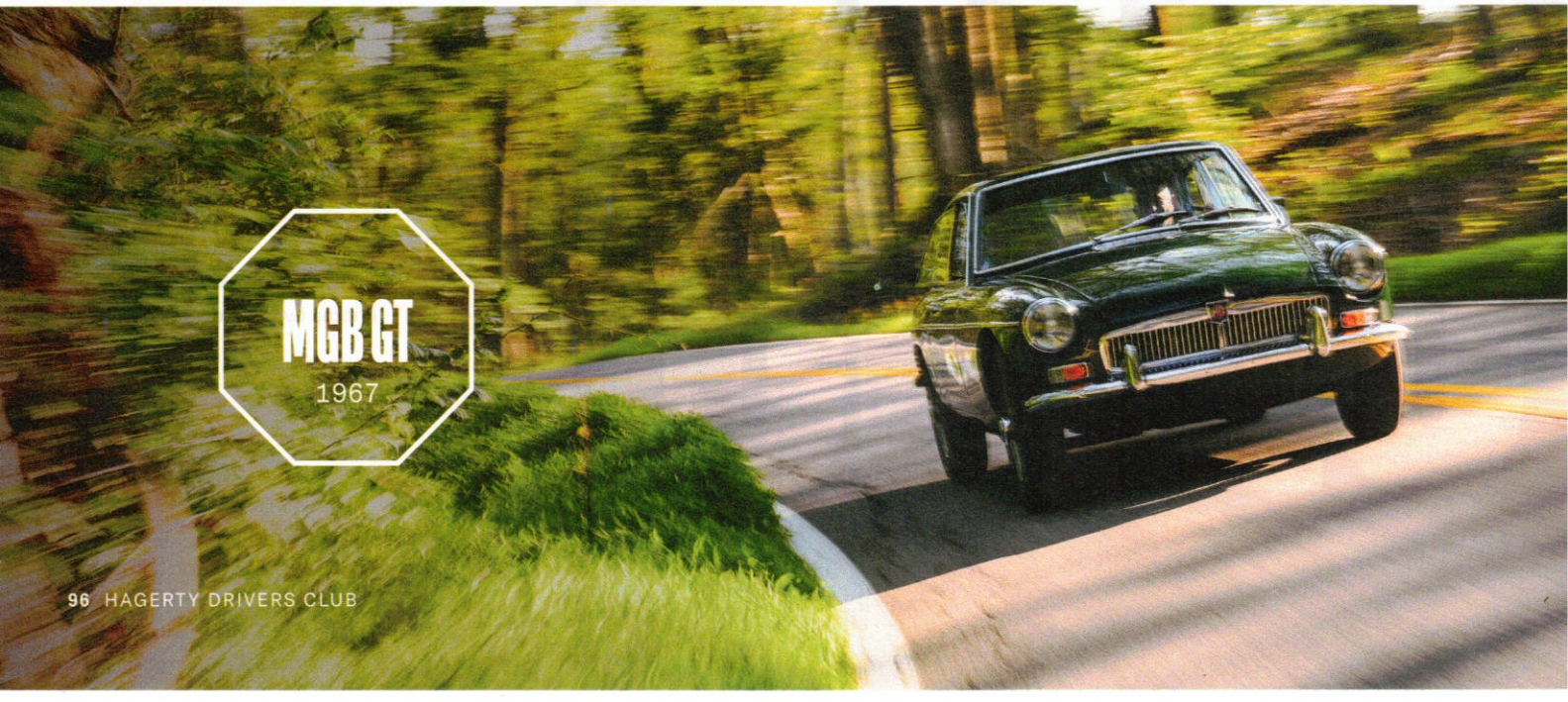
We celebrated a century of MG by driving three of its greatest hits in the Hudson Valley.

1924
2024

Words by **Jamie Kitman**
Photos by **DW Burnett**


TF MIDGET
1954


CND-5199
MGA
1962


MGB GT
1967

This story is about MG,

which turned 100 in 2024. It is also, unavoidably, about me. In 1956, my young parents took their life savings and bought a new MGA 1500 off the showroom floor in Paris for $1600—cheap even then. After spending six months touring Europe, they shipped it home to Brooklyn, where they used it to drive me home from the hospital following my birth on Christmas Day, 1957.

Though they traded it in when my sister came along in 1959 (against an MG Magnette ZB sedan, no less), in later years, my father would regale us with stories about the fun they had in their A. It became, for me, the automotive gold standard, and the thought of racing down mountain roads in an A—shifting gears adroitly, with my future sweetheart sitting admiringly by my side—became a life goal.

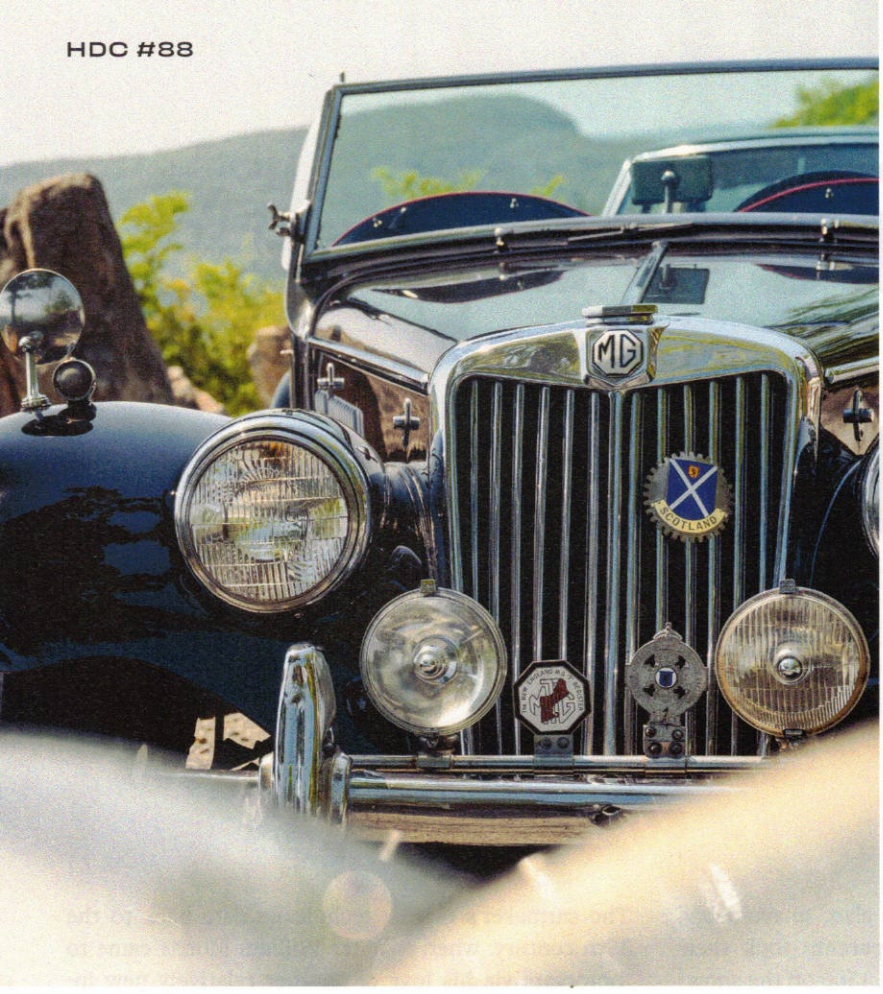
MG's centennial provided as good an excuse as any to consider the brand anew, so we gathered its three most successful model lines—the MG TF, the MGA, and the MGB GT—on winding New York state roads. Each of these cars has, over the decades, imprinted on me, touched me, distracted me, and almost wrecked me.

There's something uniquely right about an MG on a winding road in the Northeast. We took our trio to lovely two-lanes around New York's Bear Mountain.

LIKE SO MANY things about British cars, MG's 100th anniversary designation is charmingly inexact. The carmaker's origins technically date back to the 19th century, when founder William Morris came to motorcars via his love of another relatively new invention, the bicycle. He loved them so much that he opened a factory for their manufacture, which soon enough led him into motorcycles. Not notably successful in either endeavor, he pressed on undaunted, opening Morris Garages to sell cars (initially WRM Motors), then Morris Motors Limited to build them. The first Morris Oxford—affectionately known as the "Bullnose"—was released in 1912 to some acclaim.

Major success came with the Morris Cowley of 1915, also bull-nosed but bigger and more powerful. That model set Morris on the road to riches, enabling him to place his hands in many pots, acquiring suppliers and additional brands sufficient to become one of England's most successful and decorated industrialists. (Fancy titles included an OBE in 1918 and baronetcy in 1929. By his death in 1963, he was officially Viscount Nuffield.) Of the many brands he shepherded—including Morris, Wolseley, and Riley—only MG remains.

At his best, Morris was an assembler of companies, a more stable British version of General Motors' acquisitive Billy Durant. Always looking for new ways to access people's pocketbooks and an enthusiast himself, he landed on the idea of a more sporting Morris. And so it would be, with the Cowley forming the basis of what is considered the first MG. Known as the Super Sports Morris, it was assembled in low numbers at Morris Garages starting in late 1923 and was



registered, along with the signature octagonal logo, in 1924 (hence the 100-year celebration).

In short order, a small range of mildly upmarket specials emerged, and in time, stand-alone models debuted, derived from the prosaic fare that comprised the Morris lineup. As the decade unfolded, Morris general manager Cecil Kimber—who has been called the father of the British sports car—grew convinced, along with William Morris himself, that sporting success would grow the brand.

The first MG Midget, a diminutive number shown at London's Olympia Motor Show in 1928, established a formula that produced a dizzying number of iterations over decades. Success on the track and in numerous world speed record campaigns carried MG through the 1930s and beyond. Its new factory, established at the vast Pavlova leather works Morris had acquired in Abingdon-on-Thames, however, was soon put to war work.

The first model after World War II was the TC, undertaken after the Luftwaffe destroyed tooling for its predecessors, the prewar TA and TB Midgets. Like the earlier cars, the TC was assembled in the 1920s style, with a wood-frame body mounted on a petite steel frame. Delightful if antiquated, it nevertheless became the company's first export hit. As author David Knowles notes in his recently released and highly readable volume *MG Century*, the prevailing myth that American servicemen were the first to embrace the marque is largely untrue; rather, the TC's initial overseas breakthroughs were in Australia and other Commonwealth countries. Eventually, though, America consumed as much as 70 percent of all MG sales.

TC sales far exceeded those of its predecessors, with 10,001 units delivered over its four-year (1946–49) run, quite credible for the day and a big shot in the arm for the company, which labored under Britain's export-or-die policies. (The kingdom rewarded manufacturers who shipped cars abroad, particularly to the land of the American dollar, by offering them greater access to scarce materials.) The MG TD, new for 1950, was much improved by Nuffield engineer (and father of the Morris Minor and Mini) Alec Issigonis, who blessed it with an independent front suspension of his own design. The TD nonetheless remained a senior citizen from jump.

The TF, the first of the machines we tested one sunny summer's day on the roads along New York's Hudson

Even in the 1950s, the TF's upright grille would have looked old. Octagonal gauges likewise evoke an earlier era of carbuilding.

But on the open road (above right), the TF feels surprisingly modern and fun, if also undeniably slow.

River, is also the last of the T-series. Often viewed as a stopgap while MG finished cooking up a more modern postwar sports car, the TF competed against such estimable cars as Jaguar's XK 120 and Austin-Healey's new 100. Debuting in time for the 1953 model year, kicking off what would be a three-year run, the TF bore familiar but more up-to-date lines, with sweptback fenders and a slanted grille and windshield. Additionally, the TF had the last of the Morris-based engines, designated XPAG/TF, which displaced 1250 cc and was carried over from the TD.

The TF we drove resides in proverbial "incredible survivor" territory, a one-family-owned car from new. Its current caretaker, Dr. Charles McNair, an internist turned war novelist from Connecticut, received it as a well-worn gift from his parents, who bought it new in San Diego in 1954. Members of the La Jolla Sports Car Club, the senior McNairs—avid exponents of the decade's burgeoning sports car movement—flogged the TF the way you might hammer a modern car, regularly inviting the tiny, 57-hp roadster to carry them over what today sound like extraordinarily long distances, including several round trips of thousands of miles to Colorado for mad-dash rallies.

Charles took over the MG while attending college in San Diego in the '60s, but a grueling stint as a medic in Vietnam intervened before he could return to his education. "My hospital was the first in the evac chain out of Cambodia and took only the most shot-up guys while getting rockets, mortars, and ground attacks the whole month of May," he recalled. Fortunately, McNair made it home in one piece, but finishing college and then medical school in San Francisco meant the TF didn't see much action. It was not until he moved east and brought the car to Connecticut that it was back on the road. "New England is really a perfect setting for it," he noted. Restored in 1991, the TF still resides in the Nutmeg State, with 169,000 miles under its wheels.

Driving McNair's TF today, it's easy to see why it appealed to 1950s sports car buyers. Purists might have denigrated the canted grille (the actual radiator was a separate piece, no longer incorporated into the grille shell as it had been in previous T-series), but to my eyes, the TF was always the prettiest in a long parade of MG Midgets that stretched back to the '20s. More modern than its predecessors, yes. But with low-cut doors, side curtains, an external fuel tank, and a folding windscreen still in place, the TF is modern only in

The TF (top) and A (bottom) are separated by just a few years but look like they come from different planets.

JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING IS DIFFERENT IN THE TF'S SUCCESSOR.

the sense that a single cheeseburger is more vegetarian than a double.

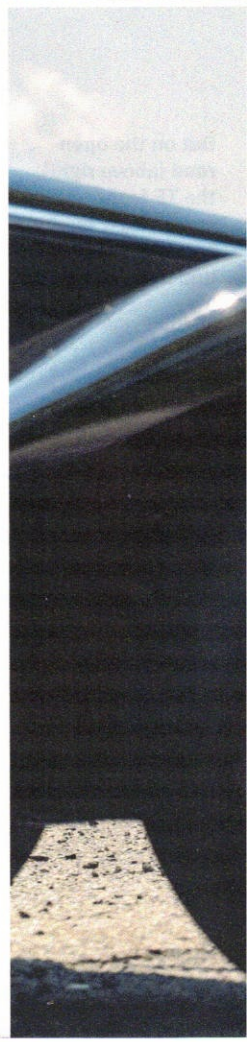
Wearing a now 33-year-old paint job in its original black, McNair's TF looks rakish and exceedingly handsome, with red leather upholstery and painted wire wheels. Easing into bucket seats (a step up from the TD's bench) and casting my gaze past its banjo-rim steering wheel at a dashboard topped by the car's double-humped cowl (a shout back all the way to the racers and Midgets of the 1930s), I note a generous assortment of gauges, each shaped like the MG octagon—machine-age Easter eggs, if you will.

More familiar with the driving experience of later MGs, I expected the TF to be deathly slow and scary to operate—bias-ply blackwalls don't necessarily enhance a modern driver's optimism on this score. Though its straight-line performance—a hair under 19 seconds for the 0–60 run—does make its successors feel positively rapid, acceleration when you're behind its big steering wheel, wind whipping vigorously, is brisk enough. The TF is also low enough, rigid enough, and possessed of enough steering feel to make winding roads fun. Come to think of it, brisk is possibly the wrong word. Flat-out, contemporary road tests suggest, it could reach 80 mph. But as we drove around Bear Mountain State Park, nothing about the TF suggested that this would be a good idea, with somewhere around 60 closer to striking the right balance between reaching your destination and hearing yourself think.

The TF was a smashing success for MG, with some 9600 produced. Yet it was essentially a placeholder and, even in its day, a throwback. MG had recently been merged, along with the Nuffield Organization to which it belonged, with the Austin Motor Company, forming the British Motor Corporation, or BMC, in 1952. An ultimately ill-fated marriage that saw Austin's iron-fisted leader Leonard Lord favor Austin over Morris and its wards, it didn't always serve MG well. Indeed, cold calculation at the top delayed the TF's replacement.

That replacement finally did arrive in 1956. Although one discerns the family relation, just about everything is different in the TF's successor, the MGA. It had an all-new steel chassis whose hefty side rails sit outside of the seating area—you truly feel you're sitting in an MGA, as opposed to a T-series. Side curtains remain, but the cabin is roomier and the MGA's cut doors don't permit drivers to drag their knuckles on the pavement. Gauges are round and, in a further nod to modernity, a proper trunk sits behind the occupants, large enough to hold several pieces of soft luggage. That assumes you've remembered to stow the side curtains in the hanging case behind its two seats, which inconveniently impairs access to the removable panel that covers the two 6-volt batteries that comprise MG's 12-volt system, on top of which also lies the folded convertible top. (Let's not even talk about erecting the roofs on either of the cars we've considered so far.)

The MGA's stout chassis wore an all-new body, its svelte design loosely based on a factory-built race car for a privateer running the 24 Hours of Le Mans in




North Broadway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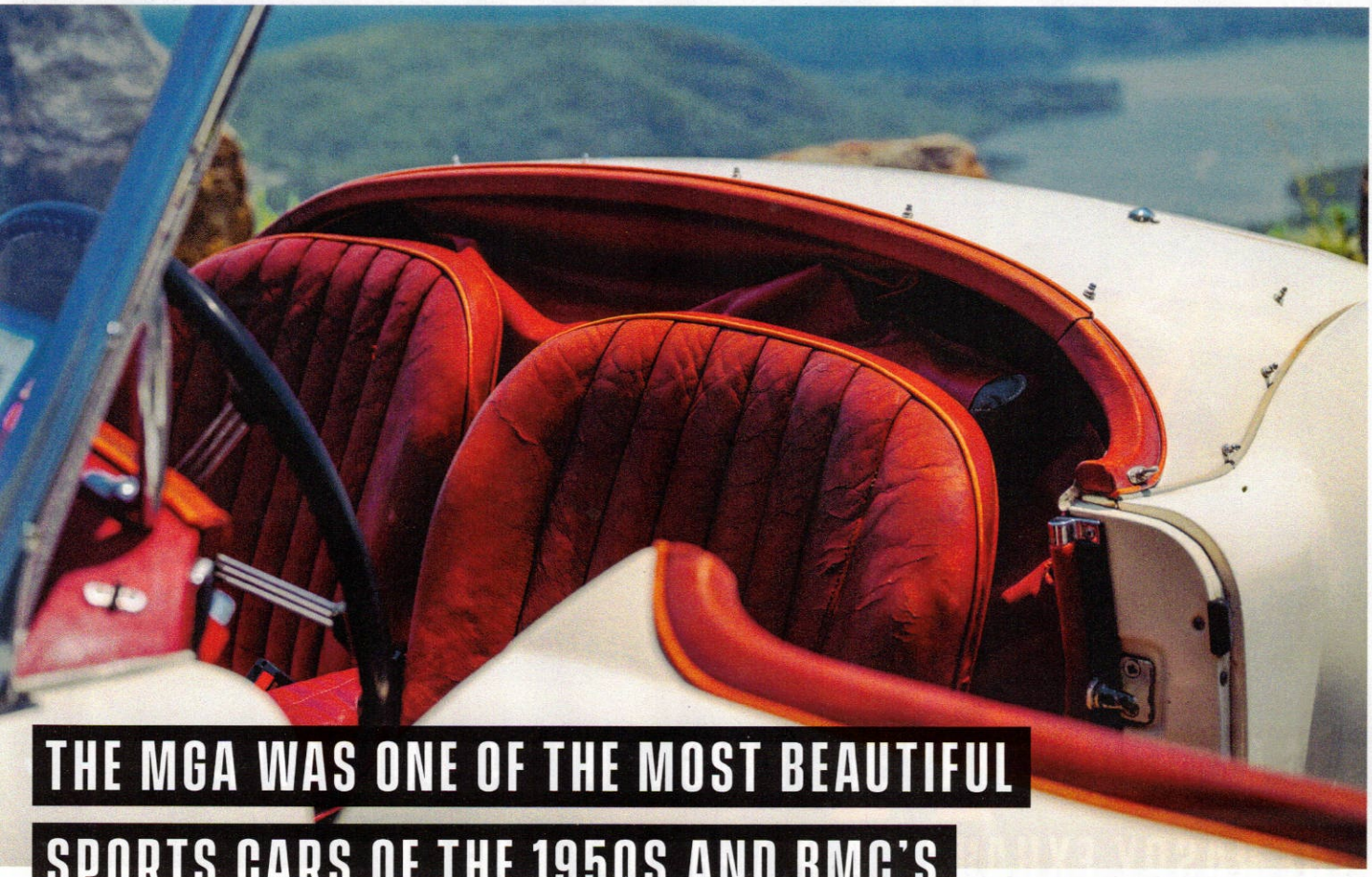


THE MGA WAS ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL SPORTS CARS OF THE 1950S AND BMC'S GREATEST AMERICAN SUCCESS.

1951. The Le Mans racer was scrounged up using MG TD mechanicals by Syd Enever, who'd joined the company in the 1920s at the age of 14. New corporate overlord Austin's B-series engine was spruced up for sports car duty with twin SU carburetors. Displacing 1489 cc for the MGA 1500, the model received a boost to 1588 cc with 1959's MGA 1600. A twin-cam version suffered from underdevelopment and was withdrawn from the lineup in 1960, with only 2111 sold.

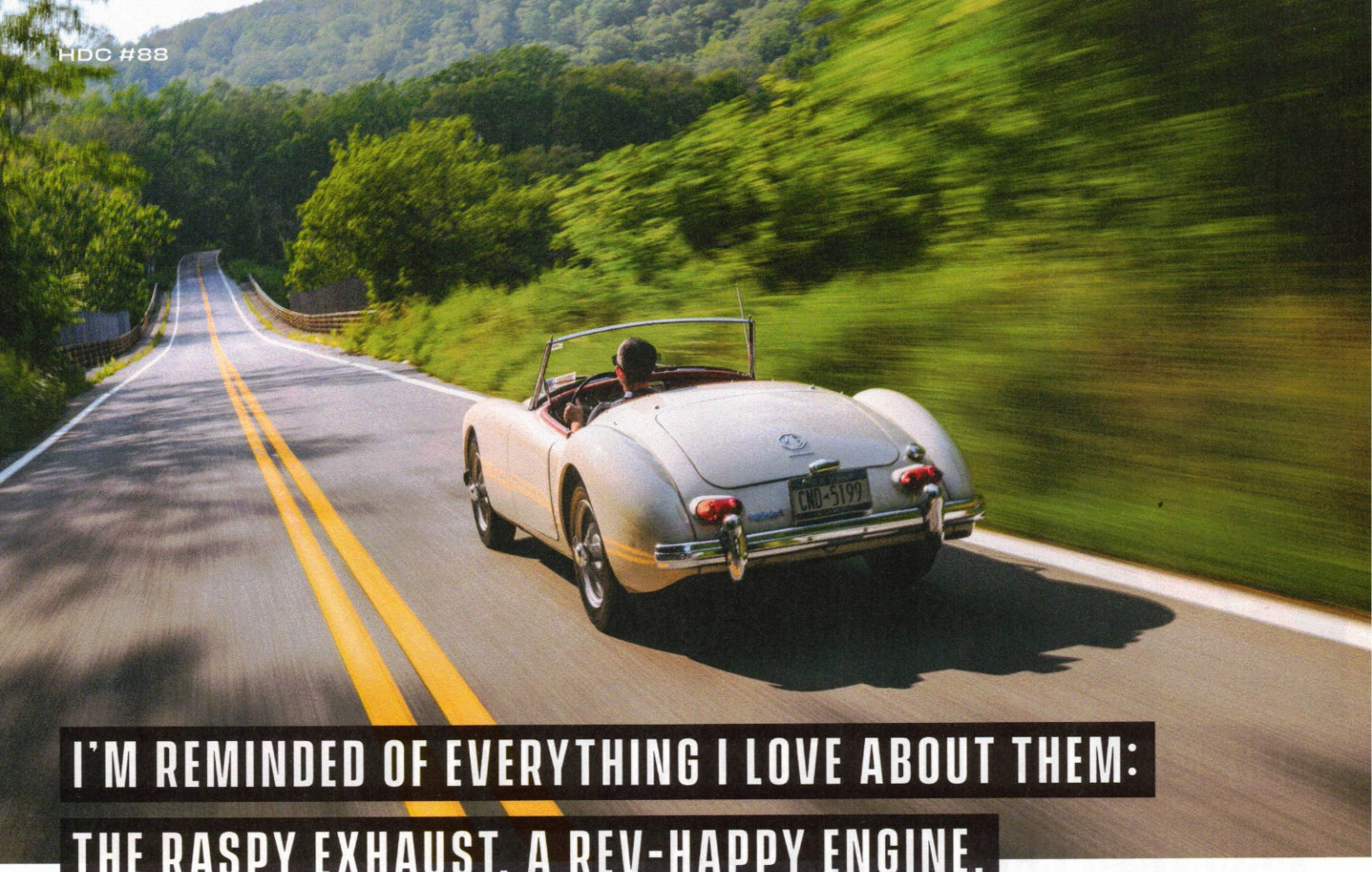
One of the most beautiful sports cars of the 1950s, the A was usefully updated over the course of its six-year run, which ended following the 1962 model year. Selling an unheard-of 100,000 units, it was BMC's greatest American success.

Several of them passed through my hands in the succeeding decades. A 1957 MGA was my first car in 1972, purchased in concert with three friends for the princely sum of $50. Fire-damaged, it was finally set to run again when someone offered us $125 for the rear half of its body. Given the year and our 14-year-old mindset, we were, like, "Ka-ching!" and hastily agreed. The body was sawed in half in what would today be considered a monstrous act of sacrilege. (On the bright side, it was the first time I made money on an old car. It was also the last, at least for the next 25 years, but that's another story.)

My current MGA, purchased in 2004 and photographed on these pages, is a 1600 Mk II. A 1962 model, it is outwardly distinguished by its recessed grille, vinyl-covered dash, and yet another set of taillights, borrowed from new corporate cousin Mini, turned sideways and mounted on plinths. The B-series engine, now displacing 1622 cc, churns out a whopping 90 horsepower and 97 lb-ft of torque thanks to larger valves, improved porting, flat-top pistons, and a stronger crankshaft. With a revised gearbox and a lower final-drive ratio, it reaches 60 mph in a bit over 12 seconds. A top speed in excess of 100 mph is attainable, making the Mk II the reliable performance choice among MGAs.

Compared with McNair's TF, this particular MGA has enjoyed a pampered existence. Sold new to an old

Looking at the MGA, one gets a keen sense of just how cool British culture was during this period.



I'M REMINDED OF EVERYTHING I LOVE ABOUT THEM: THE RASPY EXHAUST, A REV-HAPPY ENGINE, AND A GEARBOX WITH RIFLE-BOLT ACTION.

man in Connecticut who suffered a stroke weeks after its purchase, the A was dry-stored for a decade or so, then bounced around collectors' garages, winding up in Gulf Shores, Alabama, with only 19,103 miles on the odometer. I spotted it in a classified ad in the North American MGA Register's magazine and detoured considerably from a reporting assignment in New Orleans to scope it out. It was love at first sight. I closed the deal immediately—and fortuitously, as it might well have been lost when Hurricane Katrina pounded the coastal town mercilessly the following year.

A keeper of the first order, it remains tight and rattle-free over the 20 years and 11,000 miles of my acquaintance, requiring nothing but tires (155/R15 Michelins) and routine maintenance.

Running through the gears on our day's outing, I was again reminded of everything I love about MGAs: their looks, the raspy sounds of the exhaust, and that rev-happy engine sucking air and fuel through its twin SUs. A manual gearbox with rifle-bolt action retains its title as one of the best I've ever known, beaten only by the Miata five-speed. Direct steering is also about as good as it gets, with low-speed maneuvering made easy by skinny tires and a hefty banjo wheel. A disarming lack of frippery (my car has an optional heater, AM radio, AAMCO floor mats, and that's it) fails to detract from the sense of occasion. Nor do doors that open with a pull of a wire cord in recessed door cubbies. It is far more rigid, with better handling and panel fit, than, say, the Austin-Healey 3000 or the Triumph TR4A, two other "most beautiful" candidates that once adorned my garage. I miss the mellifluous grunt of the Healey's weighty six but not its bendy chassis or congenital scuttle shake.

Indeed, having owned several other British sports cars, I always come back to the MGA.

MG itself, of course, had to move on at a certain point. Which brings us to the third car we sampled on our self-appointed Centennial Day: a 1967 MGB GT belonging to David Silberkleit. Known to many through his Branford, Connecticut, outfit, the Bugeyeguys, Silberkleit has to date restored and sold more than 400

The A on a good road is a distillation of what makes driving enjoyable.


38
NO PARK


MGB MG GT
74731


MG

Austin-Healey Bugeye Sprites (the progenitor, it bears mentioning, of the 1960s MG Midget). Silberkleit, whose shop appeared in these pages in the September/October 2021 issue, is a British car lover extraordinaire and keeps (and occasionally trades in) non-Sprite confections like the very neatly restored GT he brought along for our amusement and edification.

Debuting for the 1963 model year, the MGB was and remains a remarkable sports car, the more so when you consider that its ultra-rigid unibody—MG's first monocoque sports car—and harmonious mechanical components are the result of people working with slide rules, pens, and foolscap pads. History compels us to note, too, the indelible human touch at work on the B, especially the signal contributions of the aforementioned Syd Enever, the creator of the 1951 Le Mans racer who was still around to conceive the MGB in the early 1960s with stylist Don Hayter.

Credit, too, to John Thornley, an enthusiastic owner and co-founder of the MG Car Club, whose passion

THE MGB WAS AND REMAINS A REMARKABLE SPORTS CAR.

was such that he joined MG in the 1930s by persuading Cecil Kimber to give the club an office on MG's premises. He quickly assumed company duties, rising through the ranks to become the firm's general manager. His dedication, skill, and willingness to run interference against MG's often hostile corporate overseers are borne out by the B's commercial success, which went on to break all MG records, selling 520,000 units over the course of its life.

A quarter of those were MGB GTs, denoting a hardtop with a fastback roof. Handsomely sculpted with an assist from Pininfarina, the GT eclipsed the roadster's looks. It added a healthy dose of weather protection and grand touring capability to the B's already improved accommodation, with its roll-up windows, more spacious cabin, and additional power. There's also a folding back seat that may be pressed into service for luggage and (very small) people.

Further development of the B-series inline OHV four, now with 1798 cc capable of stirring up 92 horsepower and 110 lb-ft of torque, made the MGB zippier than its predecessors. It hit 0–60 mph in the low-12-second region and top speed surpassed 100 mph. Manual transmissions were de rigueur, though later in life, power-sucking automatics became a rarely seen option.

Our test GT arrived resplendent in British Racing Green, with a black interior, riding on the oversize 15-inch wheels that graced the later MGC (a short-lived yet underappreciated six-cylinder variant). Silberkleit's car is also fitted with an English Ford Sierra's five-speed gearbox, which many owners today employ in favor of finding (or repairing) the optional electric overdrive that made MGBs true highway stars.

The B is a better car in many ways than the A. It's torquier and a bit faster. It rides more smoothly and has more cabin room. The heat works a little better and, with its roll-up side and twist-out vent windows, it's more civilized, especially on hot summer days. Veteran factory man Enever, back in the day, noted that the goal of the B was "to give sports car motoring to as many people as possible" and "...to provide the fastest possible car, combined with the greatest possible degree of safety." Silberkleit, who drove his car 90 minutes each way through New York–area congestion in order to partake in our exercise, confirms that Enever and his colleagues hit their mark. "Most British classics of this vintage are a collection of rattles, issues, and punch lists, but you can make these cars quite reliable if you add the right upgrades," he said, adding, "This one's a keeper." It certainly is. Yet much as I long to own another GT (I had a ropy one in college), the day proved to me I'm still an MGA man at heart. Less practical, yes—though more so than a TF—but it's a raw machine that feels sportier.

○○○

ONE LESSER-KNOWN feature of the Mk II MGA like I own was its provision for mounting three-point seatbelts, which I installed right away after acquiring mine. Three-point belts saved my life once, in one of the dozen MGBs I've owned over the years. One week after installing the belts in my 1967 MGB, I pulled out while passing a tractor-trailer on the George Washington Bridge at night, only to run into a gargantuan early '70s Chrysler stalled with its lights out in the passing lane. I was going 55 mph, yet miraculously, none of the Mopar monster's seven occupants were hurt, and though I pulverized my face and didn't make the dinner date I had that night, I healed eventually. I'm still here, with few complaints.

So I can, for better and for worse, attest to the company's famous slogan—"Safety Fast." It arose in the

The MGB GT is, among this trio, the closest to what one might call practical, thanks to its hatchback shape. It's also the most powerful and the most tractable at higher speeds.

I CAN, FOR BETTER AND FOR WORSE, ATTEST TO THE COMPANY'S FAMOUS SLOGAN—"SAFETY FAST."

1920s after Cecil Kimber suggested the motto "Faster than Most." An unprovoked mutation at the hands of some wag with a paintbrush, who appended the word "Bicycles" to the phrase on an MG billboard, resulted in its quick relocation to the circular file. "Safety Fast!" was a play, author David Knowles reports, on the warning triangle that appeared on many buses of the day with the words, "Safety First!" When people asked me about it in my early MGA-driving days, I explained that I understood it to mean, "Get to safety, fast! Before somebody gets hurt." Little did I know.

○○○

IT'S NOW BEEN painfully close to half a century since a new MG was sold in America. The last MGB rolled down the line in 1980, the model's 18th and final year, replete with federal regulation–inspired raised ride height, asthmatic anti-pollution tune, and sad rubber bumpers. Talk about vibe-killers. MG's subsequent decline and death at home took another 25 years, but as far as America was concerned, it was lights out for the storied brand.

Lately, MG's new owners since 2007, SAIC Motor of Shanghai, have been making a strong go of it, though they have no immediate plans to launch any of their electric model range in America, despite robust sales not just in China, but also across Europe and, notably, in MG's birthplace and original home, England. But, as The Bard once said, what's past is prologue and MG's beginnings were humble, not unlike their new Asian masters—who, by Western standards, play things unusually close to the vest. And they're building a plant in Mexico. So who knows? The last chapter hasn't been written yet. // editor@hagerty.com

New MGs have retreated from our shores, but the TF, A, and B continue to carry out the brand's mission of providing attainable driving fun. A good example of each can be found today for less than $20,000.