Mercedes-Benz S-Class W126

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Few cars have ever held the general public's attention as much as the Mercedes-Benz S-Class W126, which was launched in the autumn of 1979 to a relatively confused public.

Certainly, it seemed less immediately high-profile than the rest of the Mercedes-Benz range, hard though this may seem for us to imagine now. After all, from "Black Rain" to "Lethal Weapon," Hollywood has done its part to make W126 a more sinister car than Mercedes had ever intended for a model that was supposed to placate people who, coming out of the 1970s, felt that owning a luxury car was in itself excessive.

Indeed, the objective of the design team, led by Bruno Sacco, was to produce a car that was sleeker, lighter, and faster compared to the old W116 S-Class. Now, over twenty years after its first introduction, it is clear they succeeded in designing and building a true classic. W126 solidified Mercedes' reputation for over-engineering their cars, yet possessed more elegance than arrogance. One got the impression that every piece of the car had a purpose, down to the trademark ribbed tail-lights (which, it turned out, were self-cleaning by design). This, more than any other, was beauty achieved through function, with a visual poise and grace that simultaneously added to, yet was borne out of, its stature.

Proportionally, W126 was perfect – and yet each piece was larger than life. That Mercedes understood that this increase in size deserved a matched increase in detailing was good; the fact that this detailing was consistent throughout the car was its trump card.

Every curve was a precise, aerodynamic match of the other; the windshield swept up and outward at the base even as the vertical lines down the hood prepared the eye for an ultimately lower-set sweep around the grille, one of whose lines made its way across the headlamps and to the tip of the lower-set tail-lamps. The two lights, front and rear on each side, found their own ways to classically wrap around in a delicate parallel to the rear door line.

Considering the classic, long rear overhang on W126, the car makes a true mockery of some of the bad visual rear weight management that seems to be an epidemic today. That Sacco was able to offset the sharp rear door line with soft rear curves remains a visual triumph, and apparently a skill that eludes many manufacturers today.

Incidentally, we eagerly await the return to fashion of full-length tail-lamps.

Although W126 production ended in 1991, many of the last few cars found their way to the U.S. as 1992 models.

W126 continued to be made in South Africa through 1994; Nelson Mandela was presented with one upon his release from captivity.