

# SINGER FOR A SONG

You don't have to fork out a six-figure sum to acquire a backdated 911: we checked out two cars that achieved that goal for a tenth of Singer money

Words: Johnny Tipler Photography: Antony Fraser



**K**nock a nought off Singer's \$300 grand price tag and you're not far off what each of our two feature cars cost, proof that you don't need a second mortgage to own a backdated 911 that oozes character. But though both have the stance of early '70s 911 racing cars they are as far apart in character from one another as it's possible to be: one's a trackday hooligan, the other's a limousine. It's not hard to guess which is which. Johnny Lyons' svelte Silver Surfer (as I'm minded to call it) is a lovingly crafted take on a classic 911 competition car, while 'Greystoke' (home of Tarzan, geddit?) is a no frills, in-your-face track-whacker that wouldn't have looked out of place in the 1973 European GT championship.

Our rendezvous is arch back-dater Paul Stephens' premises, where Greystoke is on sale. At a shade less than £30K this 3.2 Carrera-based 911 is one of the cheapest cars in the showroom, and a far cry from Paul's exclusive hand-built PS AutoArt cars that start around £60K; indeed, it's more on a par with 911s from his 'budget' RS Technic range. Its pigmentation may be understated, but its swollen contours proclaim high-performance pretensions.

We had a tip-off about Johnny's 964-based 911 from Des Sturdee, custodian of PCGB's 'Modified' register, so we were keen to see how good the self-made Singer looked in the metal. For metal it is, barring the front and rear RS Touring bumpers. It's broad in the beam, with the attitude of a circuit racer from circa 1972, a 2.8 RSR with no ducktail, perhaps, though that's where the similarity

falters: 'I refer to it as the Sport Touring,' says Johnny. 'Does what it says on the tin: sport heritage with its wide body, but built for touring comfort rather than out-and-out speed.'

Johnny's love affair with 911s began aged 8 on his daily school walk, past a pair of 2.7 RSs. A couple of decades elapsed before he could act. 'It was 1991 when I had just got married and moved into my first flat, and I saw a 964 and I absolutely fell in love with it, and I said, "that's going to be my 40th birthday present to myself." Meanwhile a succession of project cars came and went: Escort Mexico, MG Midgets, a V8 Dutton (!!). Then came a 964 C4S, but soon enough he needed another project.

The Sport Touring, or Silver Surfer, was built in west Yorkshire by a metallurgist. 'He's an absolute early Porsche 911 addict,' affirms Johnny, 'and he did the same with a 3.2 Carrera a few years ago. Then somebody else asked him to do another one and I think he's done two or three now. He's got a little garage with a couple of guys and they do small conversions. I told him about my ambition, and how I wanted to be part of the process, and I felt he was a guy I could do business with.' A lot of time was spent deciding exactly the contours and rotundness of the wings, and how to flare them into the front and



Flared front arches hint at the S/T look. Central mounted fuel filler is classic 911, while small bumper devoid of the RS oil cooler box was a preference for a cleaner look



rear valances. The wing extensions are in steel, S/T front and RSR rear. Johnny was fired by the well-publicised 356 project of Shane Balkowitsch in the US and obtained the paint code from the Zuffenhausen museum for the original 356 of Prof Porsche – K45-286. The Silver Surfer was painted by Overfinch, who normally specialise in turning Land Rovers into rocketships. It's very low with an extremely wide track, and I asked what his inspiration was. 'The '73 RSR Martinis were beautiful cars, and I did wonder whether to give it the Martini livery at some stage. But what I love about this is, whilst it's poised and a big statement, it's also an understatement because we've taken off anything that affects the lines, like the side indicators, petrol cap and door mirrors, so it's smooth and clean from front to back.'

The devil is in the detail, as ever, and the broad wheelarch extensions took 200 man-hours to achieve. The racing filler cap is plumb centre in the elongated front lid, though Johnny is slightly perturbed by petrol fumes, which could be to do with the location of the filler aperture being in front of the cabin air intake, and the jury is still out on that one.

It has a plain front bumper like that of the 2.4 cars with no overriders. 'I didn't want the RS oil cooler box front,' says Johnny. 'I just don't like them and I was keen to have

an understated front bumper.' The back bumper has the chrome overriders, but otherwise that angle is also uncluttered. The window surrounds are polished aluminium, and the most difficult job was getting the chrome strip to fit within the rubber windscreen surround. What's most surprising is the plain engine lid, which sports no ducktail spoiler; this is a fast, powerful car and probably should have an aerodynamic device if ever it was to max out on an unrestricted autobahn. He doesn't like them, though, because they spoil the purity of line.

The oil cooler is relocated sideways ahead of the right-hand front wheel to accommodate the curve of the wing, and with the abandonment of the 964 sill cover, the oil pipes that run along the right-hand side of the car needed to be tucked underneath the car to hide them, and the oil tank and thermostat moved back behind the rear wheel arch. The front jacking point is removed because it's too intrusive, so the car is jacked up just from the rearward jacking point. 'Because the chassis is so rigid it lifts the front and the back up all in one go.'

It's significantly lighter because both the 964's impact bumpers have been removed, and Johnny thinks it's lighter than a 964RS now. 'I think it's about 1,265 kilos, and the ride height has been set up to match the RS's to make sure the handling's right.' Because of the classic

rear bumper and the absence of the deep valance at the back you can see most of the exhaust system, which is concealed with a regular 964. And that is one special system, fabricated by Hayward & Scott at Basildon. I watched them make one for my old 3.2 Carrera and it was a serpentine work of art, so I can appreciate what's been constructed for the Silver Surfer. Like me, Johnny observed it in the making: 'I spent some time with them, working out what the right configuration was, and it's got a separate Hayward & Scott silencer as well, because the first take had no silencer, just a straight-through Cup pipe and no cat, but the din was just

The front luggage compartment is also clad in red leather, and if it was roomy enough you'd be happy to curl up in there too. 'Singer did something similar in their engine bay,' says Johnny, 'but I've not done anything in my engine bay because it would be filthy in a week.'

There's a period-look Caliber digital radio and a new sound system, and with his eye on the traditional dashboard of the E- and F-programme 911s of the late 1960s and early '70s, Johnny ordered a strip of the leather basket-weave to clad the midriff of the dash panel. At first it seemed it would be impossible to source a genuine dashboard from that era, but whilst visiting Karmann

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unbearable! I mean, when you're a man of my years you need a little bit of comfort, so I got them to put an extra silencer on it to quieten things down and restore the relationship with my neighbours!

The suspension is 964, augmented by coil-over Bilstein dampers. Those 17in split-rim wheels look big on a classic 911. They're gin front, 11in rear, with spacers all round, and shod with Michelin Pilot Sport Cups, 235/45ZR 17s on the front and 275/40ZR 17s on the rear.

Externally, it's got all the hallmarks of a pugilist. Internally, you could be at The Savoy. The cabin is a lavish feast of awesome red leather, and if it were mine I would be living in it. The seats are reproductions of the original '73 Recaros covered in basket weave vinyl and red leather.

Connection in Southend he chanced upon a 911T that was being dismantled. 'They were chopping it up and using it for parts, and there, staring at me, was this aluminium dashboard, so a deal was done and off it came.' Johnny then amended it to fit the 964 switchgear and overlaid the 964 strip across the bottom.

So, whilst the look is retrospective, the drivability is largely unaltered. 'The essence is a sporty, nostalgic car that you can go touring in, get out the other end and not feel like you've just driven 500 miles in an old car. That's why I didn't put anything else on it.' Johnny gets lots of people asking about it, and built a website ([www.911sporttouring.com](http://www.911sporttouring.com)) identified in the back window to field inquisitors because he was spending too long

*The rear arches are all metal and took 200 man hours to achieve. Fat Fuchs replicas fill them perfectly. Twin-pipe exhaust is custom made*

Interior is awash with sumptuous red leather. Seats are RS recreations, while obligatory Momo Prototipo handles steering duties. Engine remains stock



gassing: 'On its debut run I lost over an hour chatting about it, but at least I knew that I'd achieved something quite special.'

The Silver Surfer stands Johnny at around £40 grand, and that includes the donor 964 – cheap at £13K – though he reckons the body builder can't have made any money out of the project, treating it more like a paid hobby. There were economies too: the brakes and suspension were renewed, but the driveline, which has done 77,000 miles, was untouched. But as Paul Stephens points out, 'you wouldn't be able to build it for £40 grand today, because your donor car has gone up £10 grand. His

And what of Greystoke? Paul Stephens is selling it on behalf of its owner. He admits that the Singer suggestion is a bit of a come-on, since it's far removed from the finesse of the Californian product, and indeed his own PS AutoArt cars, which are themselves paragons of sumptuous retro. Nowadays there's no such thing as a cheap 964, so Paul only selects them for his AutoArt line, and the clock stops at 3.2 Carreras for the RS Technic back-daters.

Greystoke has 'been around'. Its service book is stamped up to 2001, and the bills indicate regular use and maintenance as if it were a standard 3.2 Carrera. Paul's

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prompt answer to Johnny's query about a valuation? 'I'd put it up for £75 grand.'

Now for a run out on the byways of north Essex. Johnny's 964 is like a Rolls Royce by comparison with the scallywag 3.2 Carrera, though the 'throne' seems slightly narrow and doesn't embrace the backside in the same way a normal 911 sports seat does. The steering wheel is a flatter dish, and the gear lever seems short compared with a normal 964. On our tour I found power delivery undramatic, what you'd expect of a regular 964, inspiring a much more relaxed drive, plus the ride is smoother, and the cabin's way more opulent than Greystoke's caged cell – and indeed a normal 964's.

right-hand man Charlie flips through the packed dossier: Malaya Garage in Crawley supplied the car originally, then RSR Engineering of Hindhead looked after it, and in '91 and '94 it leapt up to Glasgow to be attended to by OPC Glenvarigill at 25,000 miles. After commuting between Surrey and Scotland, John Miller Engineering saw the car in 2006, and it went to Kath Burrows in Bolton for some work on the 915 gearbox. Then in 2010 things really started to happen and the bodywork modifications were implemented. There's no evidence of where that work was done: no names, no pack-drill. Mechanically, it's documented that NineMeister in Cheshire comprehensively stripped and serviced the engine and



Above: Three-piece Fuchs look the part, as does racey interior. Modified 915 shifter improves shift quality. 3.2 Carrera engine provides adequate power

gearbox at this point, fitting new synchros and selector shafts, differential bearings, new flywheel and clutch, as well as wheel bearings and brake calipers, and they also set up the suspension. Which, on the local back lanes, is firm, and Greystoke rides quite well, though I do feel all the humps and bumps. But it's a surprise that, despite the wide wheels, the steering still feels surprisingly light. It grips securely and tracks true through the bends, indicating the potential for some invigorating arm- and footwork at full blast on a circuit. The gearshift is via a tall stick and provides quite a nice change with shorter movements than I'd have expected – once the car is in its stride; at low speed it proves harder to locate the notches. The rechipped 3.2 flat-six is a 70,000-miler and pulls eagerly in all ratios, emitting an even more extrovert rasp than the booming Silver Surfer.

The austere cabin equipment consists of four-point harnesses and OMP racing bucket seats, which are fine for the circuit but a drag to access on the shopping run. There's an ignition cut-off between them, and there are minimal RS-style door cards and door pulls, though the electric windows are retained. The ducktail is apt, but

whilst this car looks the part from a few yards away, a closer inspection reveals flaws in the fibreglass front wings. And you think, well, if Lotus or TVR could deliver immaculate glassfibre panels, a recent creation like this has no excuse for such rippling. Forget Greystoke, the character we have here is surely The Talented Mister Ripley. I jest, of course, but such imperfections distance the car from the Holy Grail of Singerdom. Though, hang on, maybe a '73 plastic wing does display rippling, and this is just another period authenticity. Presumably the creator didn't set out with that in mind, and the aim was simply to construct a road-going track day machine, and it does the job admirably. Sure, it's a 911 head-turner that will give its next owner a great time on the circuit or on a demanding moorland road.

On the other hand, the Silver Surfer is a remarkable aesthetic and tactile success. 'Art and science are usually at two ends of the spectrum,' says Johnny, 'but this is art and science combined, a beautiful iconic design, and the engineering is fantastic.' Achieved at a third of the cost of a PS AutoArt car, say, or a LightSpeed or a PS Automobile S/T; a Singer 'song of sixpence', if you like. **PW**

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Grey on grey is a contemporary colour scheme and it works adding a modern touch to this retro inspired machine

This backdated 3.2 Carrera is all about attitude, it's only subtly being its grey exterior colour. Super wide Fuchs rep three-piece wheels fill the arches. That exhaust is like a drain pipe!

