

Z Power

by Jon Beckett

Gulf Porsche #22... Perhaps an interesting start on a piece about BMWs but Steve McQueen's film Le Mans is what I recall from childhood and has much to do with my life long fixation with fast cars and motor racing.



My obsession extends to photos, pictures and I even have a Scalextric set in my loft, a scaled down version of Le Mans complete with Mulan straight... and the cars – well classic GT cars of course, circa '68-75. But racing little slot cars pales into significance when you can pretend to be Michael DeLaney in #22 (not 20 of course as that might bring bad karma). So much so is the film's influence that for my 30th birthday my wife graciously gave me a copy of Le Mans on DVD and a TAG Heuer Monaco Blue (he says smugly) to wear on my right wrist and fantasize about quick changing that little balsa gear knob.

As a new Z3M owner and new member of the M Power Club and the Scottish Region registers I run the risk of treading ground that has been well covered by longer serving peers... so please bear with me. As quick background - My wife and I bought our wee Z3M Roadster about 4 months ago. We were in the market for a quick roadster that we could enjoy at the weekends and still have fun on the

occasional track day (more of this below). Our initial preference was for a Porsche 911 Targa since we felt you got the best of both worlds. However on a 25K budget we felt that we could not go for the right 911 and in the right spec/condition/year. We also felt that when we did eventually find ourselves lucky enough to buy a 911 then it would be a coupe and that it would have to be one of the high end models such as the 993 RS or Turbo 4 or even an early 996 Turbo, GT3 or ultimately the awesome 993 GT2, which even the earliest second hand examples still command above 70K! I can see it now – dark blue with contrasting orange side Porsche logos and pale blue dials and of course a little balsa gearmob. But that's enough about Porsches...

Having been previous owners of Honda's mental Integra Type R – we logically considered Honda's lovely S2000 but the lack of cylinders and frenetic temperament eventually discounted itself. What we wanted was grunt (preferably in excess of 300bhp). We generally

shied away from Japanese marques for their general lack of refinement and we couldn't warrant the expense of a fairly new Honda NSX, which also fell below the 300 rule. As a bloke I of course love TVRs – old school (maybe a Cerbera or a 450SEAC). I have ogled TVRs on my bedroom wall (amongst other things) since a being a boy in the 80s. However TVRs' horrid reputation for reliability and a badge that stood for 'Trevor' didn't exactly impress the wife. That just left the Mercedes CLK AMG but since second hand prices remained well above 30K, un-sporty handling and an automatic transmission that took a fair bite out of AMG's punch ruled it out also. We were running out of options...

I had liked the Z3M for some time, well, ever since I saw the mischievous quad pipes poking out of this little toy car, 9 inch rear wheels and discovered that it was pushed along by M3 power. Funnily enough our first test drive was a Z3M Coupé at Harry Fairbairn's in Irvine. It was a lovely Imola Red



Z3M Roadster or both effortlessly ca the choice is



The interior of any Z3M is a nice place to be.

those marketing boys again - Jeff) rather than after a Portuguese race track now used more by bikes than cars but hey.

We purchased the Z3M from Coopers in Reading and after a 14 hour drive north (in all weathers and three sets of road works) I eventually arrived home with our 1998 3201cc Roadster in Estoril Blue, and it has been a decision that we have never regretted. However, there was one thing I new from various articles on the Roadster and that was that the standard suspension had to be ditched. Whatever a Roadster owner wants to tell themselves - the Z3M Coupe will always be the more natural drivers choice because the M-Power boys deliberately modified the body shell for one reason and one reason only - rigidity. Had BMW marketing rather than the Power boys from Garching designed the hard top then I think it's fair to say we would have seen flowing lines aping those of the Z8 concept. Instead we got a bread van! A very machismo bread van with hot-rod styling (I like it) but it's not pretty and that's why petrol heads like it so much. However, as aesthetics go, then the Roadster will always be the better 'looker' (nah, Jeff) as it remains more faithful to the original design and the lines are more cohesive than the rather 'bolt' on effect you get with the Coupé. I am not here to debate the whole Coupé/Roadster thing since that's down to personal choice. All I know was that for us we were able to stick to our original drop top objective and find a car with good looks and huge reserves of power and beautiful torque delivery for the road. The fact that the chassis feels overwhelmed only adds to the 'old school' feel of this Bavarian bantam - perfect for a retro man like me and in comparison to the E36 or E46 M3 - the zeds feel brutal and alive if ultimately less talented.

So I had Coopers fit Schnitzer Sports suspension. Many may point out that Schnitzer is overpriced and not the best package out there. However, as this was an approved-used car I wanted to stay initially on the right side of BMW and also budget the conversion from outset. We chose against Schnitzer's race-line package since we had heard about how unforgiving it was on UK roads. The sports package, albeit a tad firmer than standard, now bestowed the M with far better dynamics and roll oversteer largely negated without the need to dislodge internal organs. On poor roads the car does flex but having already driven the Z3M Coupé for comparison I conclude that at 6/10ths driving the Roadster feels as capable as the fixed head.

Having been a fan of tracks days well before we acquired the Z3M I was of course keen to see how it would perform. I had my first chance at Crail in October and was pleasantly surprised - finding that the car was forgiving (in the dry) with predictable and controllable understeer and a firm rear that was difficult to provoke bar applying hard lift-off or the heavy right foot. Unfortunately given the nature of the rear axle - bump steer cannot be totally negated and the poor track surface at Crail on

mentioned the mileage and the condition but these weren't important - no, the main reason was the colour. Now, the interior in black and Imola has to be the best interior I have seen in any BMW but the exterior colour left me feeling a little cold. The Imola tag was undeniably cool and it was sure to be a rare sight but for us we had our hearts set on Estoril. Why? Well, for us that shade of blue is as important as Ferrari red or Aston green. It's synonymous with the car and if our plans of building on our collection remain true over the years then I wanted to own each marque in the right shade.

Although many traditionalists will argue that a racing German car should be silver, and blue is left for the 'French race-cars', I feel silver is too synonymous with Mercedes. In reality white is more in keeping with BMWs racing history in the last 69 years but that's stepping perilously close to Porsche. Yes I would prefer if they had called the colour 'Nurburgring' (It's all about what trips easiest off the tongue -

example on a 1999 T plate and retailing for about £21,000. Bar a possible re-spray and subsequent stone chipping the car was in good fettle though mileage high on 60,000 was a little high for our liking. However what was more memorable was the way the test drive. Bloody hell! This thing was fast and it was so stable on the road like it was glued... it felt like a scaled down race car and the closest thing to a TVR in terms of feel and speed but with more impeccable manners, more stability, less rattle, better gearbox and an engine that was more silk than the Silk Cut of the TVR.

Where TVRs I had driven were just pure angry and intimidating this was pure class. At that moment the wife and I almost simultaneously forgot all notions of a soft top and almost signed there and then for the Coupé. We would forgive it anything. We thought "who needs open top when this is so good". So it's a little claustrophobic - who cares? So why didn't we buy it? Well I've



The Z3M Roadster has always been a bit of a looker.

Z3M – A bargain basement Supercar!

by Jeff Heywood

Club members will know that I am the proud owner of a Z3M Coupe, so I may be more than a little biased when discussing the merits of Z3M's, but I can honestly say that after driving many cars over the years, the ZM still brings a smile to my face like no other car. They deliver performance by the shovel-full, handle with aplomb and stick like glue... (I think you get the picture)!

Ever since I have had an interest in cars, I have always been 'star-struck' by the Porsche 911, a car that exudes sporting prowess and tradition. I mention the 911 here, because I think the 911 is the nearest competitor to the Z3M models. And that in itself is a compliment as the 911 was nearly twice the price. Other rivals? Unfortunately, Porsches Boxster model, fine car though it is, seem to be driven mostly by poseurs and hairdressers, and TVR's are too unreliable to even be considered as a viable alternative. Anyway, lets get back to the 911. Well, all I can say after driving a number of 911's is that unfortunately, they leave me cold. It's a masterpiece of engineering that the engineers from Zuffenhausen have managed to make cars like the 911 GT2, GT3 and various 911RS models handle so well, even when the engine is slung out back over the rear axle (ala VW Beetle). Unfortunately, standard models don't inspire as much confidence at speed when you can feel that engine mass starting a pendulum effect that interferes with the handling balance when cornering in a spirited manner. And don't forget, price comparison on year to year would mean paying £20-30,000 more for the equivalent 911!

What about other alternatives? SLK or TT? Give me a break. I believe you can order an automatic version in either model? – Nuff said! The rest of the pack either lack charisma or power, and when you get into the realms of the Ferrari F355/360 you are entering into Lottery winning territory when running costs are considered. Did I mention Ferrari? Yes, that's the sort of company the little Zed keeps. Performance wise it more than holds its own (a recent posting on a US website forum from an ZM Coupe owner, stated that the look on the face of a Porsche 911 GT3 owner was worth a million dollars when said Coupe and driver kept up with the Porker and Barbie doll passenger as they sped away from a set of traffic lights!)

The Z3M's to me have it all, performance, handling, decent build quality, acceptable running costs and at the prices one now sees being asked for them, they have to be the performance car bargain of the century. Of course they're not perfect, but what car is? But when you consider that some Roadsters are now being sold for less than £13,000, my suggestion would be to buy one quickly and check out that smile on your face!



BMW's Z3M Roadster, seen here finished in phoenix yellow.

turn two exposed this with some alarm – especially given the chicane and hairpin that promptly follow. After a few one word exchanges, the Zed and I agreed that a slower approach was advisable.

Now there's been a fair debate of Steve Soper's M review in Top Gear magazine. Personally, I thought he was spot on about the M Roadster, being particularly accurate of where it tends to lose time on track. The Roadster is a top road car but somewhat lacking on track. Perhaps it would have been better had the car been fitted with better suspension but then that wouldn't be a fair comparison. After all, the Z3M Coupé with Raceline suspension is one of the best track cars out there and a real 911 eater. At Crail what I did note was that my roadster was very quick in a straight line covering ground almost as quickly as the new CSL. With some enhancements I knew that the car's superior power to weight could be made to hustle very well indeed. If the handling could be sorted then the torque advantage over heavier cars would also be more deployable. What I also noted was that the chassis wouldn't be able to handle much more than standard before becoming uncontrollable and TVR-like.

Just lately, TVR have been getting a lot of press for their straight sixes but when you

think what the M boffins can do while still returning decent economy and emissions then you begin to appreciate that TVR are still the new boys. That's before you even begin to appreciate the fact that an M-spec engine will happily hit a mileage of 6 figures whereas a TVR is more like 6000. Only BMW could produce a straight six that displaces less than 3 and a half litres and still perform better (pound for pound) than Porsche's venerable water-cooled flat-6. Straight sixes were discounted 30 years ago and yet BMW has evolved them into new realms. What I cannot understand is why the CSL (given it's price tag) has been tuned to only 360bhp when 400bhp+ is achievable by increasing the fuel/air mixture and upping the red line to 8000+rpm through Group H titanium valves, race crank etc. What will be sad is BMW's gradual move into V8s, which is expected to include the next generation M3/M4. Hopefully if BMW do produce a Z4M then it will hold true to the tradition of straight sixes.

In the next issue, Jon will discuss how the Z3M models can be modified into a track day tearaway... and the ultimate road going supercar.

BMW's Z3M Coupé. Mean and muscular? Yes. Brawny? Yes. But bread van? Definitely not. Whoever coined that phrase should be strung up!

