

MASERATI 5000GT



LIFE'S

**BEEN
GOOD
TO ME**

So few people were wealthy and discerning enough to buy a Maserati 5000GT that these cars barely made a mark in motoring folklore, even if this example is immortalised in a legendary rock track

WORDS RICHARD HESELTINE
PHOTOGRAPHY LYNDON MCNEIL

The 5000GT was born after the
Shah of Persia put his money
where his mouth was when asking
the Trident-badged marque to
develop a car fit for royalty



ACCORDING TO THE SONG this car will do 185mph. But it can't. Not quite. But then the almost satanically alluring Maserati 5000GT is swaddled in ambiguity and convolution and marshalling concrete facts about it is epically frustrating, so why should the precise top speed be any different? For five years from 1959 just 34 of these super-exotics were made. No fewer than eight coachbuilders clothed them and original owners tended to be royalty, industrial magnates, dictators or Hollywood stars. This was perhaps the ultimate GT of its era, with only Ferrari's 400SA Aerodynamica providing honest competition. But, contrary to some reports, it wasn't merely a rebodied racing car.

Back-peddle to 1958 and Maserati was haemorrhaging. Having withdrawn from works involvement in motor sport that same year and bleeding red ink, the Bologna firm needed a shot in the arm. And fast. With its new 3500GT it got one but still couldn't turn a profit. With creditors hovering, the firm lucked in and found an unlikely sugar daddy.

It's now that truth and fable blur. Legend has

it that Omer Orsi, son of Maserati's post-1937 keeper Adolfo, was firing off brochures to eminent power brokers in the hope of bringing in custom. The Shah of Persia, Mohammed Reza Pahlevi, was one such recipient. He was taken with the 3500GT but was also rather partial to the fearsome 450S sports-racer, so he arranged a meeting via his embassy in Rome. Chatting to Maserati engineer Giulio Alfieri, his eminence voiced a desire for a car befitting royalty. What's more, the Shah agreed to pay development costs; all that remained was the small matter of building the car.

Its basis was a strengthened chassis borrowed from the 3500GT, which also provided the basic running gear: double-wishbone front suspension, live Salisbury rear axle and front-disc, rear-drum brakes. Power came from the 450S's monstrous V8, which was good for 400bhp at 7200rpm. In a bid to make it more tractable the capacity was upped and the compression ratio lowered, though the helical gear camshaft drive remained as did twin Marelli distributors, 16 spark plugs and four gurgling twin-choke Weber 45 carburettors. Now displacing five litres, the

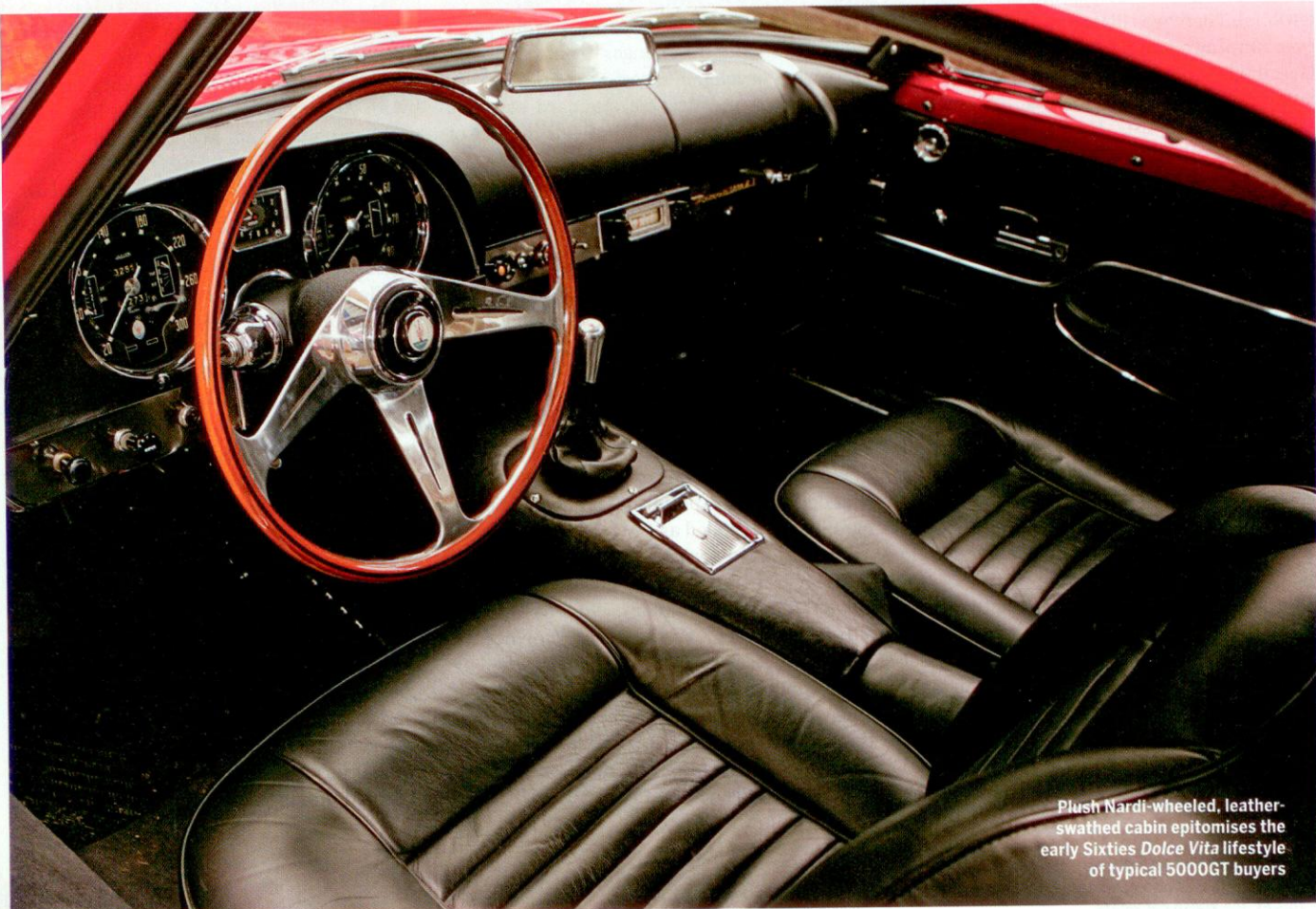
5000GT tag was entirely deserved and the first of many visits to carrozzerie beckoned.

Bertone was approached initially but Touring of Milan ultimately got the gig; the end result was either unconventionally attractive or conventionally unattractive depending on your sensibilities. And as this outré coupé winged its way to its expectant owner a second car, also bodied by Touring, was exhibited by Maserati at the 1959 Turin Motor Show where it was snapped up by Kyalami circuit owner Basil Read. A small production run was mooted and Monterosa swiftly bodied a third car. Beneath the skin, however, it – and those that followed – deviated mechanically from the initial brace of 'Scia di Persia' cars.

First up, Alfieri carried out a comprehensive redesign of the race-bred V8: the 5000GT nomenclature was still warranted but the engine displacement was arrived at by different bore and stroke measurements. Gone too were the gear drives (replaced by chains) while Lucas mechanical injection substituted for the quartet of Webers. The twin-plug ignition remained and in final guise the bent-eight produced an honest 325bhp (down from

Humble Ami headlights were a foretaste of Citroën ownership





Plush Nardi-wheeled, leather-swathed cabin epitomises the early Sixties *Dolce Vita* lifestyle of typical 5000GT buyers

'FOR SHEER NO-WORD-OF-A-LIE PERFORMANCE NOTHING FROM THE SAME ERA CAN TOUCH A 5000GT'



Maserati 5000GT

Engine 4935/4941cc, V8, dohc per bank, Lucas mechanical fuel injection

Power and torque 325bhp @ 5500rpm; 326lb ft @ 3600rpm

Transmission Five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive

Steering Recirculating ball

Suspension Front: independent, double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar. Rear: live axle, longitudinal leaf springs, telescopic dampers

Brakes Discs front and rear

Weight 1652kg (3642lb)

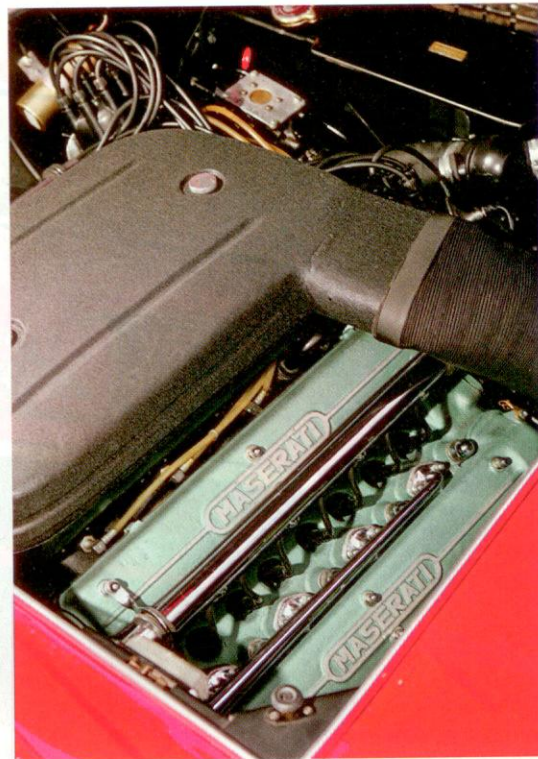
Performance Top speed: 172mph; 0-60mph: 6.5sec (est)

Fuel consumption 15mpg

Price new £4600 (approx)

Value now £500,000-plus

The first two 5000GTs were powered by engines virtually identical to the 450S racer's; Giulio Alfieri made subsequent examples more user-friendly, upping capacity marginally from 4935cc to 4941cc and trimming output from 340bhp to 325bhp



340bhp). There was little danger of the model ever running out of puff, legendary test driver Guerino Bertocchi using the Modena-Bologna autostrada as his personal playground. Ferrying journalist Hans Tanner on a memorable ride in 1960, the 'ballast' calculated the car had achieved a flying kilometre at an average of 172mph, the whole 17-mile trip taking 6min 50sec...

Following the first Monterosa car, and in chassis order (if not necessarily build order), there was a single example bodied by Pininfarina for Fiat principal Giovanni Agnelli (with a hand clutch as he'd lost his left foot in an accident), a third car by Touring, a second Monterosa production, a car by Allemano known as the Indianapolis, a Michelotti oddity commissioned by race team owner and yachtsman Briggs Cunningham and a Ghia offering for Ferdinando Innocenti penned by future OSI styling chief Sergio Sartorelli.

Serafino Allemano's rendition (actually the work of Giovanni Michelotti just to add to the confusion) was subsequently adopted for what passed as a 'catalogue' model, the Turinese coachbuilder bodying a further 21 examples, even if no two cars were ever truly alike. Allemano's tiny carrozzeria (also remembered for its Abarth offerings and involvement with

ATS) produced what was arguably the most balanced silhouette, changes beneath the skin mirroring developments of the 3500GT: disc brakes all-round became standard as did a five-speed gearbox and 15in wheels in place of the previous 16in rims.

Rounding out the production run were a further two cars built for Karim Aga Khan by Pietro Frua, the frontal treatment on both being subsequently cut-and-pasted on to the first-generation Maserati Quattroporte. One of these oddballs featured deerskin upholstery, the other housed a record player in the dashboard. That leaves one last chassis, which continues to be shrouded in mystery: presented at the 1961 Turin Motor Show, Bertone's offering was used by the factory as a development hack and modified extensively that decade to the point that it has since been erroneously labelled as a Mexico prototype in some marque histories.

The car featured here, chassis 026, was delivered new in January 1964 to Dottore Alfred Belponer, president and owner of Scuderia Brescia Corse. It was later owned by some-time member of The Eagles Joe Walsh who, on resuming a solo career, immortalised the car in his 1978 satire of rock celebrity, *Life's Been Good*: 'My Maserati does one-eighty-five/I lost my licence, now I don't drive/I have a

limo, ride in the back/I lock the doors in case I'm attacked.' Recently recommissioned by marque specialist Bill McGrath Ltd and owned by an Australian Maserati collector, it may soon accompany its keeper to his summer retreat at Lake Como.

Which would be a more suitable backdrop than sodden Blighty in winter. Yet as drizzle turns into rivulets the unglamorous setting is forgotten just by taking in the car's myriad details. It's not exactly pretty and the Allemano outline teeters perilously on the margin between impeccable taste and vulgarity. But it is truly fabulous. While some 3500GT cues are obvious, not least the doors with their surfeit of quarterlights, the rear glazing conjures images of early Fifties Studebakers. And despite being so pricey when new – it cost more than a Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud II – some of the minor trim items were predictably lifted from more proletarian fodder: the headlights for example are from a Citroën Ami.

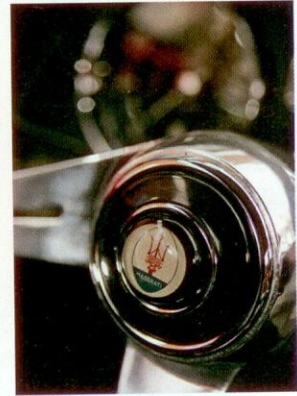
Inside it's Jet-Set swish with a heady mix of quality leather and chrome-bezelled Jaeger instruments plus the obligatory Nardi steering wheel. The expansive glasshouse affords panoramic vision and, unlike many similar cars seemingly built with scant regard for the human form, it's comfortable without the expected simian seating position.

No two 5000GT bodyshells were the same, but – like 21 other examples – this ex-Joe Walsh car wears coachwork by Serafino Allemano





Front and rear quarterlight combination reflects the 5000GT's 3500GT heritage



'USING BARELY A QUARTER THROTTLE, THE 5000GT IS RAPID – NOT JUST QUICK FOR ITS AGE, BUT GENUINELY FAST'



And then the really good bit. The 5000GT's pure-bred heart is commotion itself. It proffers the sort of strung-out, gnarly backbeat that reduces even those who've been overexposed to the good stuff to a state of unfeigned wonder. It's the sort of bellow that flicks two fingers at the timid. Even flexing the throttle while stationary leaves you in a seduced state of adolescent idiocy. *Phwoar* and then some.

All of which means this car has a lot to live up to. But, as it has covered a mere 100 miles since an engine rebuild and it feels like it's been raining for months, exuberance isn't on the agenda. Yet using even barely a quarter throttle, the 5000GT is rapid. Not just quick for its age, but genuinely fast. There's palpably a lot more to come once it's run in to the point that Tanner's period musings appear to be more than hyperbole. Each change on the ZF gearbox ushers in more glorious uproar from the exhaust pipes, the V8 running the sonic spectrum from pent-up fury to guttural howl with each rise in revs.

The ride quality is much better than you'd expect. At moderately enthusiastic speeds it turns in with poise even if the steering is a little low-geared. There's body roll, as befits its vintage, but it never threatens to spill, with the front and rear ends working in unison. All that's lacking is more effective butt-shoring from the rather flat thrones. That and more responsive brakes, while the notoriously rubbish clutch is both heavy and vague.

Giulio Alfieri

PARMA-BORN Alfieri's name is inextricably linked with Maserati motor sports greats and its most revered road car engines. He began his professional life in the world of steam turbines before joining Innocenti in 1949. Four years later he joined Maserati and soon headed the technical department. He went on to engineer legendary competition tools like the 'Birdcage' sports-racer (below) and 450S and to develop the V8 that powered GTs and supercars from the 5000GT to the Bora and beyond.

Citroën took control in 1968 and one of his first briefs was to design the V6 that powered the Citroën SM, Maserati Merak, Quattroporte II and Ligier JS2. Alfieri's tenure with the firm ended when Alejandro de Tomaso took over in 1975: de Tomaso hadn't forgiven him for opposing an earlier takeover bid. Unbowed, Alfieri became president of Honda in Italy before joining Lamborghini where he contributed greatly to the Quattrovalvole variant of the firm's long-serving V12. He died in 2002.



Fortunately, such is the torque swell regardless of gear that you don't often need to change gear.

This is a tremendous machine, though it failed woefully to return a profit. Far from helping turn around Maserati's flagging fortunes, each car cost the firm money despite punters having to stump up a hefty deposit. That the chimerical 5000GT was bodied by so many different metal welders, that there were all manner of configurations, has likely short-changed the model ever since. To the wider world it's just a node on supercar lore, one that's been largely forgotten for the simple reason that so few were ever aware of its existence. These cars just weren't *seen* first time around. Nowadays they pass quietly among collectors and rarely appear on the open market. Even then their values tend to be massively overshadowed by period Ferraris.

While some body styles were hard to look at, they were equally hard to ignore. And for sheer, no-word-of-a-lie performance, nothing from the same era can touch a 5000GT. Even now a brief outing leaves you barely oxygenated and grinning like a loon. It may not 'do 185' but few cars engender such a sense of romance and glamour for the period in which they were made. An iron fist in a bejewelled glove, and all the better for it. It's magnificent... **CE**

Thanks to Andy Heywood of Bill McGrath Ltd (www.classicmaseratis.co.uk)