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The resurrection

Words **Phil White** Photography **Dave Woodall**

From a sleepy rural town on the Channel islands to the hectic freeways of America's 'Golden State', this Cooper S finally found its spiritual home with a man named Jesus.

Putting his Cooper S, Jesse De Leon says: "My proper name is Jesus, and the Cooper S has had a resurrection. How cool is that?". Let's face it, he has probably made this joke many times before, but we think it's funny. His car has had the full benefit of a nine-year restoration to bring it back from the brink of decrepitude. "It wasn't so bad," protests former owner Kurt Oblinger. "It was passable," concedes Jesse, "but tired. I vacuumed it all out when I got it. Anything that hung down I ripped off straight away. I needed to know what I was working with."

This is California, where old metal lives a long time unaffected by rot. But some body repair was required as the car lived in the UK until 1978. Jesse knows this because Kurt, who owned it from soon after its arrival in the USA until the mid-1990s, had the good sense to research its former life. "I got in touch with the Cooper Register," he says. "The guys there traced the car and I managed to get in touch with its first owner, who wrote to me." On August 29, 1964, Mr Denis Jean swapped an MGA and £120 for a brand new Austin Cooper S. Thus began, he writes, "over 11 years of very enjoyable motoring in our small island of Jersey, the UK and the Continent, going to such great events as the Le Mans 24 hours, the Spa-Francorchamps 24-hour saloon car event and the German Grand Prix at the Nürburgring".

Despite Jersey labouring under a blanket speed limit of 30 mph, the Mini managed to have quite a hard life with Mr Jean. Not only was he an enthusiastic fan of race events, but he also competed in hillclimbs, sprints and stage rallies. It was powered "from 1965 to the end of 1973 with a modified road-going engine," he writes. "It was my only car at the time. From 1974 to the end of 1975 the car was given a full race engine." Throughout its career it was pretty successful, and one class record set in its fastest phase apparently stood until 1982. Mr Jean returned the car to road use in 1975, and it must have seemed a little tame as a result. He traded it in for an MGB GT V8 the following February.



Black and silver Jersey plates are instantly identifiable.



After a year or so of being passed round Jersey car dealers, the S found its way to Long Beach, California and into Kurt Oblinger's hands. "It was always a great car," he says. "I ran it pretty much as a daily car most of the time I had it. Eventually, I found I had other cars and it wasn't getting used much." So he sold it. "My wife said 'you've paid what for what?'" Jesse grins. "It took a little explaining."

According to information from the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust at Gaydon, the car was built on August 13, 1964, and sent off to the Jersey dealer four days later. It was finished in Tartan Red with a black roof, and had the red and grey/gold trim. The only optional extra included was a heater. Mr Jean made a few improvements to the spartan specification. "The extra fuel tank was added," he recalls, "as were wide road wheels. When new it had a different grille, but now it has quick release buttons for better access to the ignition." Mr Jean also added a rear anti-roll bar and some extra dials.

A fresh start

Jesse on the other hand, was to do much more than that. The heart of the machine for him was the engine, and he decided to start afresh. Historically the car started with a 970cc unit, but he was aiming higher than that. The new motor came from *Mini Magazine's* old friend, Graham Reid of Heritage Garage in Costa Mesa, California. It is Heritage's usual A-plus-based road-spec creation, breathing through twin 1.5 inch SU carburetors and overbored to give

“Throughout its career it was pretty successful, one record stood until 1982”



CLASSIC RESTO

TECH SPEC



BODY 1964 Mini Cooper S shell, chrome bullet rear-view mirrors, reversing light, Wood & Pickett wheelarch extensions, respray in red with black roof.

ENGINE 1275cc A-plus unit, 1293cc with 0.02 overbore, K&N airfilters, twin 1.5 inch SU carburetors, inlet manifold matched to head, Stage 3 ported, polished, big-valve head, ARP 11-stud kit, Kent 266-degree cam, AEG 584 cam followers, oversized, dished pistons, resized con-rods, upgraded nuts and bolts, heat-treated crank, Manifold exhaust manifold matched to head, RC40 exhaust system, twin-core radiator, six-blade tropical fan, high-flow water pump, Kevlar top and bottom coolant hoses, twin fuel tanks.

TRANSMISSION Metro four-speed manual transmission, KAD short-shift mechanism.

SUSPENSION Rubber cone suspension, Adjusta-ride height adjusters, anti-roll bars front and rear.

BRAKES Cooper S discs and calipers (front), Minifin drums (rear).

WHEELS & TYRES 6x10 Cosmic alloy wheels, 165/70 Yokohama A008 tyres.

INTERIOR Cobra Monaco race seats, RJS Racing five-point harness, Grant GT steering wheel, Autometer Sport Comp monster tachometer, Twinkle multi-view mirror, half rollcage.



“The 6x10 Cosmics require Wood & Pickett arch extensions to cover them”



1293cc. Modifications are chosen as much for reliability as outright power, including 11-stud head fixings, a heat-treated crank and an uprated twin-core radiator with the six-bladed ‘tropical-spec’ fan. Thanks to a Stage 3 ported, polished big-valve head matched to inlet and Manifold exhaust manifolds, and full lightening and balancing, it gives healthy torque. Jesse is delighted. He has had a trouble-free year of

fun in the car and judging by the vigour with which he flings it around for our camera he hasn't been particularly easy on it.

Mr Jean's formula of adding a rear anti-roll bar kit seemed like a good idea, and Jesse decided to go a little further. Now there is a corresponding unit at the front and the car is lowered using Adjusta-rides. It sits well on 6x10 Cosmic alloys, which require Wood & Pickett wheelarch

extensions to cover them. Jesse saw no reason to deviate from the original looks, and the red and black colour scheme remains unchanged. Also present and correct are period details such as the Cooper S bumper overriders and the aftermarket reversing lamp.

The interior has changed however. The downside of long-term residence in California is that plastics are broken down



Bumper overriders and an aftermarket reversing lamp are in keeping with the period.





The original 970cc unit has been replaced with an overbored 1275 A-plus 5Stage-3 block.



by the sun. There wasn't much left of the original trim, so Jesse had new side panels and rear seat covers made in red and grey velour by his neighbour. "I repair sewing machines and he works with them," he says. "It's a great combination." Up front are Cobra Monaco race-spec seats. "I chose the widest seat I could get," says Jesse with a grin, cracking open a beer and looking guiltily at the barbecue behind him. "It fits

great, but if I put on another five pounds I'll be grounded." Alec Issigonis didn't have 21st Century Americans in mind when he sized up the Mini.

Mini-mal devices

Like Mr Jean, Jesse found the minimalistic instrumentation lacking. He drafted in an Autometer Sport-Comp monster tachometer to help him avoid over-revving the engine. He

PAST LIVES

An early Mini can potentially be almost 50 years old and, as Jesse's car shows, it could have travelled a long way during that time. Nowadays cars are found all over the world, and shipped huge distances. Engines, bodysells and logbooks can all wander over the years and some owners find they have no clue as to the origins of their new pride and joy. For the curious, the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust can prove a godsend. The Heritage Motor Centre at Gaydon houses a museum, but it is also home to an exhaustive archive.

For a small search fee you can find out details such as the original chassis and engine numbers, colour and trim options, dates of build and despatch, and where it was sent to. Further information can be found for Mini Coopers through the Mini Cooper Register. This is how Kurt Oblinger got in touch with Mr Jean, allowing them to fill in the historical gaps for a car they were both very fond of.

www.minicooper.org

www.heritage-motor-centre.co.uk



Cooper S alloy pedals are a must for such a top-spec Mini.

also added a brilliant multi-lens rear-view mirror that labours under the unlikely name of Twinkie. This is the first we have seen on a road car, Twinkie being a more familiar sight in racing Minis. On track it helps drivers spot faster cars nipping up the inside on a corner, on American roads it helps drivers avoid being run over by monster trucks and juggernauts. Everyone should have one. Should anything untoward happen, Jesse has sensibly invested in a half rollcage and five-point harnesses.

"It's amazing," Mr Jean wrote to Kurt Oblinger in 1991, "how far it has got in its life." In the 1960s, especially living on a small island in the UK, the Mini would have been a fairly old car after even the 11 years he owned it. Two decades was usually enough to render a car into reddish-coloured dust. It is said that travel is good for you, and its transatlantic journey did this Cooper S no harm at all. Thanks to that and the miraculous ministrations of a bloke called Jesus, it is approaching its 43rd birthday, and looks as though it will see a few more decades yet. 

