

CLASSIC DRIVER

Bugatti EB110SS - The Forgotten Supercar

The following is an extract from Roberto Giordanelli's feature in Auto Italia magazine, Issue 107 2005. For access to the full feature, plus articles on driving the outrageous twin-engined Alfa Romeo 164, the 2005 Coppa Milano-Sanremo in a Lamborghini Miura, track testing the ex-Charles Pozzi Le Mans Ferrari Daytona Competizione, and much more, see www.auto-italia.co.uk



I suspect that, like some of you, I too had put the Bugatti EB110 into the file marked 'Just another 90s supercar'. Well here are some numbers to think about. How about 0-60mph in 3.2 seconds? Or 0-100mph in eight seconds? Or what about the quarter-mile dragster yardstick of 125mph in 11 seconds? Top speed - at 221mph, one third of the speed of sound.

If these numbers are slightly quicker than you remember, it's because this EB110 is actually an SS (Supersport). Okay, okay, I can hear you all saying that it may be quick in a straight line but what happens in the corners? Sorry to disappoint, but it's brilliant. Its weight is down from 1620kg for the regular 550bhp EB110 to just 1420kg for the 650bhp SS. Add four-wheel drive, semi-race suspension and some spoilers and you would be surprised how this car responds to chuck-about antics normally reserved for lightweights.

I arrived at Verdi's supercar workshop near Heathrow and exchanged my 13bhp scooter for the 650bhp supercar. When Carlo Verdi told me that it is quicker than an F40, I smiled the smile of a doubting Thomas but Verdi was right. After 14 years, there is more headroom than I remember, maybe there has been a mod, or maybe the seat has settled. The years have certainly added a patina to this beastie. While the carbon dash says racing car, the hand-stitched leather says luxury. Everything adjusts but if you have long legs you won't be happy. Rear vision is non-existent through the central mirror, or by spinning your head, and vision is best described as marginal via the door mirrors. If you want to reverse, you will need a minder. One thousand heads turned as I drove this rocket ship to our Surrey test track. Apart from the Bugatti nose-badge, this car is devoid of labels because it's the original factory prototype for the SS and was never intended to be sold. It boasts lightweight materials, carbonfibre bodywork, Plexiglas rear screen, vent holes behind the side glass, special exhaust, special wheels and lots more.

There is a brutal rawness about the EB110SS; a rawness that exists in the Ferrari F40, Lamborghini Diablo and McLaren F1. But where Ferrari and Lamborghini used a steel spaceframe, the EB110 was the first road car to use aluminium bodypanels bonded to a carbonfibre chassis. Ex-Lamborghini duo Paolo Stanzini/Marcello Gandini designed the EB110SS, and Aerospaziale built it.



The mid-mounted 3.5-litre V12 boasts 60 valves and four IHI turbochargers. Transmission is via a six-speed gearbox to all four wheels with the torque split is 27% front and 73% rear. While you enjoy fabulous traction, four-wheel drive always brings a weight penalty. Weighing 1420kg and powered by 650bhp, the Bug prototype boasts 460bhp per tonne - a chunk under the 545bhp/tonne of the McLaren F1. While the Bugatti can't quite match the McLaren's straight-line speed, it does have four aces up its sleeve. Cars with this kind of power, especially turbo cars like the F40, need to be treated with huge respect. Light the blue touch-paper on an F40 on anything but a perfect surface, and I mean perfect, and you never know for sure which direction you will be going. Likewise, the non-turbo McLaren F1 can light up the rear tyres at will. While we like chassis configurations with too much power, it can get tricky; and if it's wet, better to curl up at home with a good book. The EB110SS is not like this. Its four-wheel drive system and vast expanse of rubber instantly converts torque into hyperspeed. Throttle back and the quadraphonic sounds of waste-gates popping and whistling are guaranteed to excite. It could be psychological but there is a distinct feeling of being planted when on boost. High-speed manners are superb.

The Bug will trickle along happily once above 2000rpm. At 4000rpm it is just like a car. From 4000-8000rpm it becomes a missile. Having six gears may seem extravagant but it is essential. First gear needs to be a low ratio if the Bug isn't going to bog down on blast-off - you ain't going to spin four, foot-wide sticky tyres. Sixth needs to be fairly tall in order to attain Mach 0.3. Given each end of the gearing spectrum you really do need four intermediate gears to fill the gap. Handling is beautifully neutral and its four-wheel drive brings on directional stability normally reserved for trains. The road-going bump-thump from the hard suspension bushes makes sense once you start throwing the Bug at the test-track's corners. If you abuse it, sideways antics almost seem to self-correct themselves - the invisible hand of Le Patron reaching down to steady the car.





Words by Roberto Giordanelli and pictures courtesy of Michael Ward, and Auto Italia magazine.

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