

92 Years Young

By Robert Klara Speeding away from its stodgy image, ultra-luxe Bentley is becoming something it hasn't been since World War I: a seriously cool ride.

One of the innumerable photo ops during the royal nuptials of William and Kate this past summer took place when a 21-foot-long, wine-red Bentley coasted to a stop at the steps of Westminster Abbey. As a liveried guard opened the door, out popped “Granny”—the gnomish 85-year-old Elizabeth II. The Bentley State Limousine has been the queen’s official whip since 2002.

As free publicity, the moment was priceless—if also a bit dichotomous. Because the image of a wealthy dowager in a yellow primrose dress tottering from a chauffeured Bentley represents nearly everything the legendary automaker has been striving to distance itself from since Vickers (which also built Rolls-Royce) sold off Bentley’s name, assets, and factory to Volkswagen in 1998.

Change has taken a while. VW’s \$745 million technology upgrade at Bentley’s Crewe factory was a life-saver, but the assembly line continued to crank out stodgy, pompous gunboats like the Arnage, which was discontinued in 2009. “It was *still* the Bentley-Rolls regime,” says David Kiley, editor of AOL Autos for the Huffington Post Media Group. “Stylistically, the Arnage was just a really big car. I couldn’t take it seriously.”

Nor, it seems, could affluent drivers—who no longer wear ascots or speak with Connecticut lockjaw. By 2009, Bentley’s sales had plummeted 53 percent in the U.S.—where the new money was kicking Maserati’s tires—down 49 percent. True, some of the skid was recessionary (the superpremium auto sector contracted 25 percent that year), but there was no escaping Bentley’s embodiment of one of branding’s elemental truths: A legacy brand that fails to draw next generation buyers is dressing for its own wake.

That’s where the 2011 Mulsanne comes in—or, rather, purrs to a flashbulb-worthy stop at the curb. The new flagship of a three-model remake, the Mulsanne navigates a fine line by melding classic Bentley styling (the nine-inch headlamps nestled up to the matrix grille evoke Bentley’s iconic 1930 8-Litre) with a hard-shell coating of cool. The Mulsanne boasts amenities like paddle shifting, a leather-lined iPod drawer, Bluetooth/SIM ports, and a 2,000-watt Naim sound system that’s the most powerful in-car amplifier in the world. At three tons and 11 miles to the gallon, the Mulsanne is *still* a really big car—but its needle tickles 60 mph in 5.1 seconds thanks to a V8 that packs 505 horses under the bonnet. Clearly, management (now led by Wolfgang Dürheimer, who formerly drove R&D for Porsche) is eyeing a demo a tad younger than Her Majesty.

“We *are* talking to younger and younger customers,” confirms COO Christophe Georges. “They’re not shy and not afraid to show off what they’ve earned.” Of course, they earn quite a bit. The Mulsanne’s base price of \$290,000 is the stuff of hedge fund bonuses. But those perks have slowly returned to the high-income world—and so has Bentley. While rivals like Maybach grow showroom cobwebs, Mulsanne’s entire 2011 production line sold out in January. Bentley sales were up 6 percent last year, and brass at the Detroit Auto Show predicted double digits for 2011.

“People between 40 and 55—that’s a younger audience than there was for Bentley years ago,” Kiley says. With the Mulsanne at the lead, he adds, “Bentley has refreshed its image in the same way that the James Bond series has.” And just FYI, after detours in Audis and BMWs, James Bond is, in the latest novel *Carte Blanche*, back behind the wheel of a Bentley. Can *any* imprimatur of cool beat that?



1. Appealing to more youthful tastes, Bentley now offers a choice of **114 colors** in finishes ranging from satin to pearlescent. Paint engineers will even match your Mulsanne to your favorite color shirt, if you want.

2. In addition to offering a choice of **24 interior leathers**, Bentley lets buyers mix and match 21 carpet tones and nine wood veneers. Combined with the body colors, the possible combinations exceed a billion.



4. This retractable, jack-equipped drawer cradles a custom iPod (whose screen displays the Bentley wings when it's not being used). 5. Clutch-impaired speed demons can use the **paddle shifter**—and fool their chums into thinking they can drive a standard. 6. This chrome dial adjusts the car's suspension, so you can either “float” along the road or feel like you’re taking the Dunlop Curve at Le Mans. 7. The Mulsanne’s front-end styling pays homage to the enormous headlamps and commanding vertical grille of **Bentley’s 1930 8-Litre**—just the sort of fun fact a young tech billionaire would love to drop.



3. Perhaps the most significant new perk is one you can't see. Mulsanne's new **six-and-three-quarters liter V8** engine rates 505 h.p. and slingshots this three-ton monster to 60 mph in just over five seconds. Careful, dude, don't spill your Red Bull.