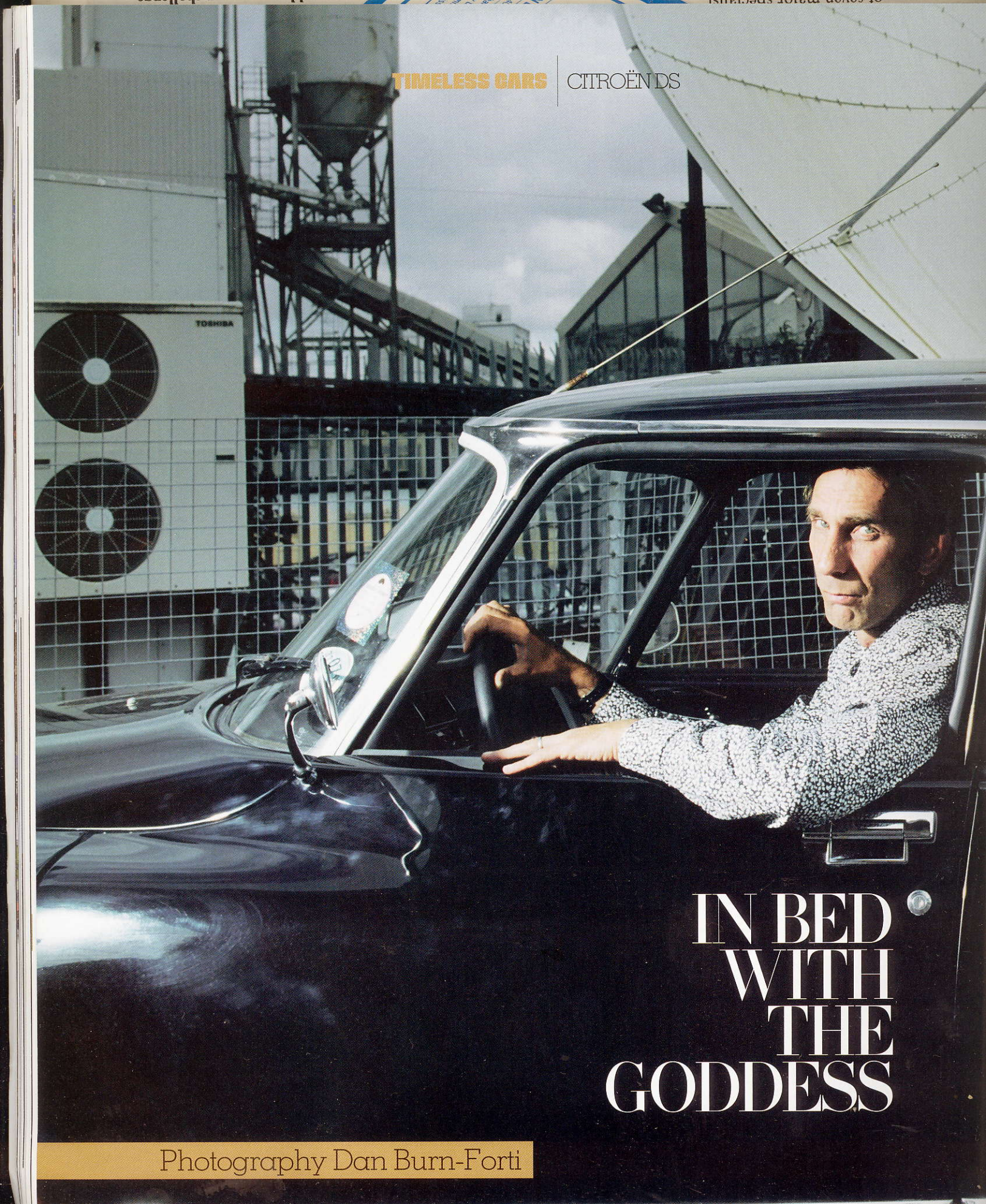


TIMELESS CARS

CITROËN DS



IN BED
WITH
THE
GODDESS

Photography Dan Burn-Forti

TIMELESS CARS

CITROËN DS

Nothing epitomises Gallic cool quite like a Citroën DS, says novelist, journalist and part-time misanthrope **Will Self**

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I

USED TO DRIVE CARS, NOW I JUST SIT IN THEM. I used to love cars – fetishise them, even – now it’s just a question of tolerance: don’t fuck with me – I say to cars in an undertone – and I won’t screw with you. I loved cars and I had lots of them, from VW Sciroccos to Austin Maxis, from a Volvo 760 Turbo

(a car I loved so much I wrote a short story based around it), to Mitsubishi Colts (not without their charm).

Don’t get me wrong – I never knew anything about what went on under the bonnet – but I certainly did like to drive, and the faster the better. London to Oxford along the M40 in 27 minutes; or burning up the A12 at 130mph, the sticker on the back bumper declaring: ‘Keep Your Distance But Stay Close to Jesus’. I liked long drives too. London to Marseilles? No problem, just point out the road and let me go. When I was 24 I drove around Australia. That’s right – clear around it. You’ve got to love the car to do that; you’ve got to love the promise of freedom it presents you with.

But I could also stand urban driving well enough too. Very early on I saw the advantages of the car as mobile hut. Put it this way: if you’re stalled in traffic don’t fret, check out the sounds, smoke, eat, read the paper, whatever. The car offers you a teasing kind of peep show; you’re in your mobile hut, doing your very private thing, while just beyond a 2mm thickness of glass are people shopping on Oxford Street. Relish this incongruity, bask in it even.

Then the love affair began to unravel. I had two kids, then three, and eventually four. The speed cameras came in; I became unable to cope with traffic jams – life was too short. I had to buy a people carrier to fit the family in – and where’s the romance of speed in that? I even took to cycling in town, and you know how that can mess with a driver’s head. I was sleeping with the enemy – and thinking about the environment. I never dug Clarkson one little bit – but now I felt like burying him altogether. Being an extremist I moved from loving cars to this bare tolerance. I stopped looking at them as if they were svelte, steel women, gliding past me in the street. I held no more illusions anymore.

However, if there was one marque that still held my attention, that still piqued my zones of metal erogeny, it was Citroën. As I say, I’d loved cars

– but I’d been in love with Citroëns. I’d ‘ad ‘em all: little 2CVs and Dianes, bigger GSAs and Visas; AXs even, a ludicrously overpowered BX GTi (that was the one with the God-bothering bumper sticker), many, many CXs (a model that fell out of favour so fast you were able to bulk-buy them in the late ‘80s), and the pièce de résistance: a brace of DSs I’d had between ‘88 and ‘90. These were awesomely beautiful cars. In design terms they weren’t huts-on-wheels, they were entire bloody conservatories, oozing across the city on their hydraulic cushions. Driving a DS wasn’t like driving any other car, it was like making love to a goddess on a waterbed.

Or my idea of what that might be like at any rate. Sure, I had all the

Francophile associations that the DS summons up: films in which it’s always 1962 and Jean Gabin, or Jean-Paul Belmondo (or, indeed, anyone called ‘Jean’), is leaping into the squishy upholstery and disappearing after the girl/crooks/cops/loot in a cloud of white dust, but the presence of

the DS is so much more overwhelming than any adolescent image of Brigitte Bardot, glimpsed through a cloud of Gitanes smoke.

I felt this when I drove the cars in the 1980s, and I rediscovered it again this week, after picking up a vintage DS Super5 ‘Prefecture’ from DS World in what its owner, Simon, laughably referred to as ‘South Chelsea’ – really, this DS recon’ outfit is under the arches off the Queenstown Road roundabout in Battersea, but let’s allow him his illusions. The second I stepped through the plastic curtains I was back in the world created by the goddess: there they hunched in

the gloom, all black, sinuous curves and shiny strophes of chromium. From the frog’s eye, hooded headlights, to the ray-gun indicators positioned above the rear window, the DS is a timeless notion of what futurity might be.

This is what the French are so damn good at: this boldness of vision; this urge to reinvent the very notion of what a car can be. They did it with the Traction Avant, they did it with the Deux Chevaux. And I’d argue that pushing half a century since it was first shaded in on the drawing board, the DS still looks more ‘modern’ than most contemporary cars. Certainly, my kids felt that way when I took them for a drive. Yup, that’s the size of it – there are no more teasing prospects to impress with new carflesh in my life than these tiny – yet fierce – critics.



FOP IDOL
It's not 1962 anymore. Bardot's beauty has long faded away and smoking a Gitanes is no longer big and clever. But the DS still exudes Francophile cool

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OVER AND OUT
While renewing his relationship with the DS came as a welcome distraction, Self found that the old flame no longer burned as bright



I REMEMBERED THE 1980S, WHEN JUST SITTING IN THE DS MADE THE HELL OF A DESK JOB IN THE CITY SEEM BEARABLE

But I'm getting ahead of myself. First, the drive. Stepping down into the cockpit of the car I was appalled by the great wave of bonnet that curled away from me. After the snub-nosed Fiat Multipla I'm used to driving, being behind the wheel of the DS felt like helming the SS France. Seeing the expression on my face, Simon asked me if I'd be alright. But when I told him that I'd had a couple of the cars 20 years before, he said: 'It'll come back to you.'

And it did. The ticking of the hydraulic spheres as the car rose up and begged, the wallowing, woozy feel of the suspension when it cornered, the incipient threat of oversteer in the primitive power steering, the hefty yank required to move the column shift into gear, the sense of the great, feline heft of the car – all of these came back to me within seconds. As did, to be fair, the deep sense of contentment which comes when you slump, sated with love on top of the great, thrumming belly of the goddess. And yes, the kids were impressed, the waiter at Ed's Diner in Chelsea was impressed, a guy in the street shouted out 'Beautiful!', a Belgian struck up a conversation with me while I was parking. Even my wife conceded: 'I don't know anything about cars, but this does seem a very lovely one.' All in all the wow factor the DS inspires

was enough to make driving it for a couple of days almost fun.

I remembered how it had been in the 1980s, when just sitting in my DS made the hell of a desk job in the city seem bearable. However, facts are facts. In those days I cared enough about the image associated with a car to spend far more maintaining the goddess than I could afford. I used to liken running my DS to sitting at home burning fivers. Simon made a case for the practical and even the environmental nature of the cars: on the continent they run them on LPG (plenty of space for your gas tank), and 80 percent of the parts are still manufactured. Still, I could recall only too well all those trips to see DS mechanics in godforsaken corners of London, and all those tortuous conversations about the bloody sills rusting. Even a beautifully renovated car like this Prefecture still moodily clunked when I turned the ignition, and on occasion threatened not to spark into life at all.

So, on balance I wasn't too sad to let go of the goddess again. Caressing her curves once more had been like any other reunion with an old lover: bitter-sweet, more a case of acknowledging what might have been, than making up for lost time. **car**

Will Self's new novel, *The Book of Dave*, is now on sale

NEED TO KNOW

CITROËN DS SUPER5



Price: £7000 (now) c.£1600 (new)

Engine: 2175cc 4-cyl, 109bhp @ 5500rpm, 127lb ft @ 3500rpm

Transmission: Five-speed manual, front-wheel drive

Performance: 0-60mph around 14.0sec, 110mph

Weight: 1310kg

Made from: Steel

On sale: From 1972-1975

Or try this: Mercedes W108 280S, Tatra 603, four Eames chairs