

Crayons to Race Cars

The Fast Track of Ralph Gilles

by Roger Witherspoon

There comes a point in the creation of a car where the designers and engineers have to bite the bullet, hold their breath and hope that the test car rolling out of production meets their expectations.

For Ralph Gilles, head of Daimler Chrysler's creative Studio 3, that moment arrived as he opened the door to the prototype Chrysler 300, a car he and his staff hoped would help rejuvenate the company and lead the way to a new era in Chrysler styling. The company was trying to differentiate its brands, and Gilles' studio had scored one hit already with its Dodge Magnum. And his Jeep Liberty had proved to be a successful link between Jeep's comfortable Grand Cherokee SUV and its road warrior Wrangler.

"Dodge and Chrysler are separating themselves into different types of vehicles, with different customers in mind," said the 34-year-old Gilles. "Dodge is a mainstream brand with an attitude.

"But Chrysler is more aspirational, more graceful with more high-end products. We're going to a premium market where the main competitors will be Volvos, Audis and other imports."

They had scored with the *Dodge Magnum*, a hot rod with a 340-horsepower Hemi engine masquerading as a family station wagon. They led the track with the 200-mile-an-hour, 500-horsepower *Dodge Viper*.

But it is the Chrysler division where they needed to shine. They needed a high end sedan, with a classical look reminiscent of a Bentley, a rear wheel drive like the best from Chrysler's heyday, and a head turner engineered soundly enough to be parked next to a Jaguar, Mercedes or Volvo without embarrassment.

The car, said Gilles, "would redefine us as a car company and it would be the kind of car the valets would park out front."

What they came up with was the Chrysler 300. "That car was a perfect storm of all our ideas," said Gilles. "That car really resonates."

And when he sat in the drivers' seat and stepped on the gas "I was almost in tears driving the car. It felt so right. It's one thing to make it look good, but the engineers brought it home."

Critics thought so, too, and Motor Trend Magazine named the Chrysler 300 its 2005 Car of the Year, beating out 24 competitors including Porsche 911, Lotus Elise, and BMW 6. Together, Gilles' cars led the way in an amazing turnaround for DaimlerChrysler, whose bottom line went from an \$806 million *loss* in 2003 to a \$1.3 billion profit in the first nine months of 2004. In all, 2004 was a banner year for the young artist from Montreal, Canada's black community.

For Ralph Gilles, whose parents emigrated to Canada from Haiti, the creative spark appeared early. He was five years old, visiting his Aunt Gisele on Long Island, New York, and, like a lot of kids, drawing what he saw. What differentiated Gilles from the pack at that early age, was the fact that his drawings were clear and made sense.

“My aunt saw my sketches,” Gilles, now 34, recalled, “and she turned to her husband and said ‘Hey Mike! My Nephew can draw! Give him some paper to draw on.’”

So he began sketching wherever he went, passing dull moments in school with fanciful drawings of cars and other modes of transport. At 15, Gilles wrote a letter to Chrysler head Lee Iacocca, asking what it would take to become a design artist for the giant car company.

“And wow, they wrote me back,” he said. “I was so impressed. They wrote giving the different names of colleges they hire from, and that was all I needed.”

He was a bit disappointed that the letter came from Neal Walling, then vice president of design, instead of the legendary Iacocca himself. “But I felt a certain loyalty to Chrysler because they wrote me, and it changed my life.”

He spent a semester in engineering school in Canada, but decided he’d rather draw.

“Design is creative,” Gilles said. “Engineering is like art work, but they’re not the same. As designers, we are in charge of the way a car looks and the emotions you get when you look at it. It’s different from the calculus and the engineering. It is a different discipline.”

So he followed Walling’s advice, attending the College of Art and Design in Detroit, which provides about 40 percent of the company’s designers, and went to work for Walling after graduating in 1992. It did not take him long to work his way up the ranks, and in 2001 he took over Studio 3, in Auburn Hills, Michigan, one of seven Chrysler design studios.

There, they work in tandem with the engineers, working together to create a package. “We start sketching,” he said “and the engineers come up with how it works, where the wheels are at, where the engine is and how it fits together. The image is ours.

“You can have the best sketch in the world, but if the package isn’t right, it won’t drive right.”

Gilles equates the design studio with a movie lot. “I direct a studio to draw,” he said. “We get together with the other team members and exchange ideas. It’s like when you make a movie, and you talk about the scenes in the movie before you film the thing.

“It’s like that with cars. No one person designs a car.”

With Gilles at the helm, the synergy between the engineers and artists obviously works. But he can’t design cars all the time. To escape, he gets away from the office – and onto a track to race his red *Viper*.

Gilles rhapsodizes about the powerful sports car. “The Viper is low slung, and sensuous with all that engine all over there,” he said. “As a young man, it appeals to you. It’s like living out your dream.”