

CLASSIC DRIVER

Breaking the waves with Gianni Agnelli's custom speedboat G. Cinquanta

Lead

In 1968, Italy's industrial kingpin, style guru and serial womaniser Gianni Agnelli took delivery of G. Cinquanta, a beguilingly beautiful speedboat designed and built by yacht maker to the stars Sonny Levi. Before RM Sotheby's offers it for sale, Rémi Dargegen hopped aboard and hit the water...

The onboard mechanic fires the four BPM V-8 Vulcano engines and the cacophonous growl that erupts and envelopes this bustling corner of Naples' expansive harbour reminds me of the start of the RAC TT Celebration at the Goodwood Revival, when the seemingly endless stream of thunderous AC Cobras departs the assembly area for the grid.



'G. Cinquanta'. RM Sotheby's did provide me with the name of the yacht and a little of its backstory beforehand - that it was designed and built in 1967 by Renato 'Sonny' Levi for the famous Fiat patriarch Gianni Agnelli - but a Google search revealed only a handful of small, grainy photos and scarcely any information.

I certainly wasn't expecting to be left speechless when the 37-foot cruiser arrived at the harbour and was carefully lowered into the water. You would simply never believe that this boat is over 50 years old, such was the superb judgement exercised by its designer on every last aesthetic aspect, from the gorgeous elliptical slatted mahogany hull sides to the delicate teak lip surrounding the small cabin entrance.



Having settled in Italy during the profitable post-War boom years, Pakistan-born Sonny Levi was the go-to guy for well-heeled playboys looking to outdo their nautical neighbours with beautiful, fast and innovative yachts that were genuinely ahead of their time. His 'Delta' hulls, an evolution of Raymond Hunt's game-changing Deep-V hull of the late 1950s, were especially sought after.

Naturally, Levi caught the attention of the nation's leading industrialist Gianni Agnelli, a charismatic playboy as famous for his love of sailing as his exquisite sartorial style, appreciation of fine art and effortless way with women. A culmination of the vast knowledge Levi had gleaned from building predominantly high-performance offshore racing boats (including two for *L'Avvocato*), the comparatively luxurious *G. Cinquanta* was arguably his finest creation yet.



G. Cinquanta was conceived from the outset for Agnelli as a 'fast commuter', a boat with the pulse-raising performance and sleek good looks of a racer melded with increased comfort, safety and all-weather usability. A fun shuttle in which to zip from Cap d'Antibes to St. Tropez or San Remo for lunch with his latest squeeze. Four 8.0-litre BPM V-8 Vulcano engines kicking out 320HP apiece were employed. They were divided and housed in two thoroughly insulated engine compartments fore and aft of the prominent central cockpit, which Agnelli had asked his old pal Sergio Pininfarina to design.



The boat's transmission was cleverly routed via four independent sets of drives, shafts and propellers, meaning that a safe, comfortable cruising speed of 25 knots could be maintained by just two of the four engines, while pushing the final two thrust levers forward could increase that speed to 50 knots.

When we set off towards the open water, I'm onboard. What strikes me is how much *G. Cinquanta* feels like a sports car - it accelerates like a scalded cat, and the deceleration is no less impressive. Using wood and epoxy resin, Levi followed Colin Chapman's 'light is right' mantra, and it tells. I have no idea how fast we're bounding across the waves, but I'm holding on for dear life and laughing uncontrollably.



Sporty yet elegant, exactly like its original owner – that’s how *G. Cinquanta* looks from our tracking boat, which I’ve now hopped into. To see the beautiful yacht being driven at speed on the open water, accompanied by that soul-stirring, staccato 1,280HP soundtrack, and defying its length with impressive agility is an experience I will never forget.

On the back of *G. Cinquanta*, Levi was inundated with orders for similar Delta boats from famous faces who presumably weren’t too amused when *L’Avvocato* glided past their moorings in his spectacular cruiser. Among them were Karim Aga Khan, Roberto Olivetti and Count Mario Agusta, all discerning and enviably stylish playboys cut from the same cloth as Agnelli.



“The best way to follow up an offshore racing event while arriving ahead of the winner,” one nautical journalist reported, succinctly capturing the appeal of *G. Cinquanta*. Agnelli reportedly enjoyed his new yacht enormously, clocking up over 2,000 miles on the water in his first year of ownership alone. We can’t help but picture him now, stood characteristically shirtless at the rearward helm, a cigarette pursed between his lips as he effortlessly navigates the long, pointed bow along the Côte d’Azur at speeds that defy the nonchalance of the image.

One of Agnelli’s close friends and relatives was especially taken with *G. Cinquanta*, so much so that he almost approached Sonny Levi to see if he’d build him a sister boat. Alas, he opted instead to restore the pre-War America’s Cup J-Class sailing yacht *Astra* – a not insignificant undertaking for a man in his twenties. Mindful of his younger relative’s passion and his commitment to preserving the world’s most beautiful boats, Agnelli gifted him *G. Cinquanta* in 1975. And it’s remained in the same ownership, maintained in its beguilingly original condition regardless of cost, since then.

Now, RM Sotheby’s has the privilege of [finding *G. Cinquanta* a new custodian](#), who’ll cherish and enjoy her as much as the last. Freshly fitted with new BPM engines and accompanied by a treasure trove of documentation, it will be offered at its online Open Roads, The European Summer Auction, the bidding for which opens today and closes on 21 July.

There’s no arguing that Renato ‘Sonny’ Levi built a boat truly befitting of the style and status of Gianni Agnelli, the de facto king of Italy. They’re big sailor’s shoes to fill, but somebody’s got to take the controls of this history-steeped yacht. It doesn’t matter if you’re not a head of industry or carefree playboy, at least you know you’ll be the envy of the harbour wherever you choose to moor, be it Mallorca or Marina del Rey.

Photos: Rémi Dargegen for RM Sotheby’s © 2020

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