



Issue: 151

Section: New Car Tests

9 October, 2001

New Car Test - Nissan S15 Silvia 200SX

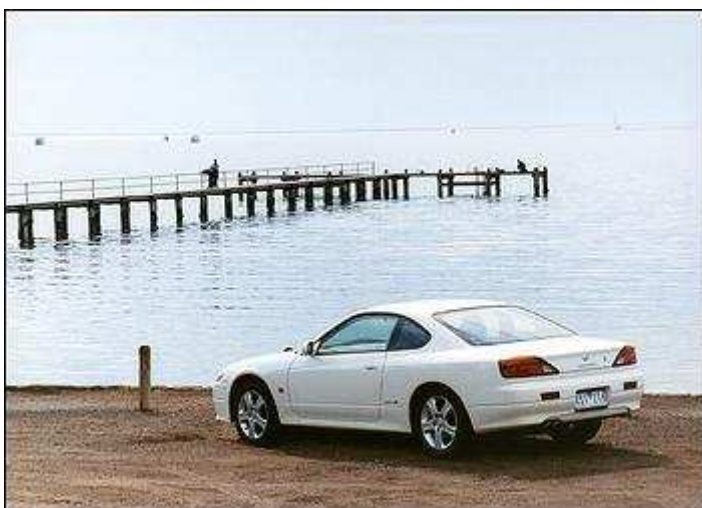
Why is everyone apparently ecstatic about a warmed-over seven-year-old car?

By Julian Edgar

The new-found excitement with which the S15 Nissan Silvia has been greeted is a slight puzzle. After all, what we have here is a new - and admittedly beautiful - body perched on the same underpinnings as the 200SX... which first saw the light of Australian day 7 years ago! In Japan, where a more powerful model is available, you could be forgiven for getting, er, aroused. But in Australia we're talking a new interior and new panels... and that's about all. Oh yes, and a 6-speed gearbox, which paradoxically is probably the most glaring shortcoming of the car!



But is the fact that the Silvia is clearly the result of evolution - rather than revolution - a bad thing? After all, if the engineers could spend that time refining and improving a good basic design rather than trying to clean-sheet a brand newie, wouldn't the chance of success be higher? Well, yes and no. Yes - cos some things (like suspension tune) can be refined over time with great results. But no - because there are other aspects of a car (like NVH suppression) that are much better done as initial computer models...



The Silvia is certainly no bad thing - progressive and predictable rear wheel drive power oversteer with a reassuring trace of turn-in understeer. A wonderful, elastic and tractable engine (that clearly reflects the years of development), good steering and competent brakes. But you also get along for the ride a gearbox that shrieks and groans like it's suffering the effects of a hard-driven 200,000 kays, and an engine that intrusively yells into the cabin whenever it is exercised in the upper reaches of its rev band. If you put in a sub and the rest of a high-power sound system, you'll be laughing - but others may well be taken aback by the Noise, Vibration and Harshness that...well... better reflects a 1994 model than one first released this year.

(And we gotta say that even old 200SX's don't have this much gearbox noise!)

And let's get all the bad bits out of the way first. Rather interestingly, other road tests have not made a song and dance about gearbox noise - while at the same time private owners are filling Web forums with complaints... Hmm - perhaps the press cars are having their gearboxes maintained very well? Certainly, in this privately owned, very gently driven car with only 13,000km on the odometer, distinct (and pitch variable) noise could be heard in every one of the seven gears. Reverse can be excused, but all six forward gears?

In addition to the whines, if you change gear while driving along next to a wall with the window open, a horrible mechanical noise can be heard. And no, the clutch was engaging and disengaging properly. The gearbox may well have "triple cone synchronisers on first, second and third gears to ensure smooth changes while second through fourth gears feature asymmetric chamfered gears for a positive change every time" but the result is less than endearing. It's a shame, because the gearbox is otherwise a sweet thing, with a perceptible notchiness that allows the driver to instinctively know when the gear is engaged - while at the same time not being excessively baulky. Other NVH negatives include engine noise that is very audible at any revs over about 4000 rpm - a long way from the 7250 rpm redline - and noise from the Bridgestone Potenza RE010 205/55 tyres which is intrusive on some coarse road surfaces.



Rear room is also appalling in the way of all Nissan coupes of the last fifteen years - headroom and legroom fit only for very small children. At least the boot is of a reasonable size, albeit shallow.

And no, we know you don't buy a two-door turbo sports car to work part-time as a people mover, nor do you expect it to be Lexus quiet. But surely Nissan could have done a bit better in these two areas?

So what's good about the car? Plenty!



You sit low in the car, gripping an adjustable steering wheel that feels immediately comfortable to the fingers - especially when you realise that its sporty styling contains one of the two airbags in the cabin. The steering is precise and well-weighted (assistance has been reduced over the S14), without having a disconcertingly razor-quick turn-in that can be found in some sporting cars. The ride matches the steering feel - it's also precise and firm - and it takes only a few kilometres to realise that the car feels utterly integrated. Over the previous model the suspension tune has been substantially changed - spring rates altered front and rear, anti-roll bars increased

in diameter, and damping altered markedly with the rear dampers up by over 100 per cent in rebound damping. The brakes, the steering, the throttle, the feedback - all are confidence inspiring and all are a match for one another. So many cars mix an oddly light steering with a dead brake pedal, a long-travel throttle with a short clutch throw - but the Silvia is not one of them.

One reason for the instant driving positives is the engine. These days it has a relatively pedestrian on-paper spec- two-step variable valve timing on one cam, single turbo, two-litre DOHC, 147kW at 6400 rpm and 265 Nm at 4800 rpm. At 8.5:1, even the compression ratio isn't particularly high for a modern turbo engine, with boost also fairly restrained with a peak factory spec of 10.6 psi.

But the SR20DET doesn't drive like technological flotsam - not at all.

Instead it's an abject lesson in how to make a turbo engine linear, tractable, completely unfussed - and grunty. Initially it's easy to be disappointed by the power, to imagine that while the tacho is flicking its way around the dial the road is not really being thrown backwards all that hard. But that underestimation comes from the engine's flat torque curve. There is never any feeling of coming on boost - you just go faster and

faster. Nought to 100 kays comes up in the mid-high sixes, while more importantly for normal driving, a massive wheel-spinning launch isn't needed for the car still to be quick. Talking about traction, the helical LSD does a good job (for a two-wheel drive car) in gripping the pavement, also contributing to the very sweet transition to power oversteer.

If you're used to the - Whoa! Here comes boost! - feeling of so many relatively small capacity turbo engines, you'll be disappointed. Instead the engine feels much more like a 2.5 litre six cylinder turbo. Of course you can catch it off boost, but only for a very short moment. That initial hesitation is likely to be found only at near-idle revs, where it needs a few more berries than normal to ease away cleanly from the line, and where a quick dart from a stop line off through traffic can initially be a little disappointing.

The SR20DET in this form is a beauty - a classic engine holding its head high even amongst younger and more technologically sophisticated upstarts.



On test was the cheaper of the two available models - the Spec S, which costs \$40,990. Over the \$4000 more expensive Spec R, the S misses out on a rear spoiler and side skirts (and in our opinion looks better for their absence), sunroof and in-dash 6-CD stacker. However, you'll still find a single CD radio, those twin airbags, manual air con and big four-pot front brakes.



Inside the cabin it's a mixed bag. We've already described the limited rear room, although the driver and front passenger are quite adequately catered for in that regard. The switch gear and instruments works fine, but the so-called "titanium look" silver finish applied to parts of the dash and instruments irresistibly reminds us of the R30 Skyline of over 20 years ago... and that car's silver finish dash looked very dated only a few years later.

So what are we to make of the Silvia? It has an engine and suspension that have been well developed over the years, but the new and beautiful body sacrifices practicality for looks - though of course that could be said to be the norm in many two-door sports cars. The rest of the car is competent without being outstanding in any area... except in one. And that is - as we have seen in AutoSpeed technical articles - the S15 Silvia engine responds astonishingly well to modifications. Give the Silvia the 20, 30, 40 or even 50 per cent power gain that's easily possible, and then the whole car would leap another level.

After all, even if the mods were very conservative - say just an exhaust and a little boost - you'd end up with a Silvia with 200kW. And we wouldn't have any ambivalence at all about that car...

