



THE CORVETTE MYSTIQUE

A Cult, A Sex Symbol, An AMERICAN Sports Car

BY JOHN TOMERLIN

FEW WHO ATTENDED the Palm Springs Road Races, back in the summer of 1955, could have guessed that the Chevrolet Corvette was headed for great things. It was passed by more MGs in the course of the afternoon than a London "bobby," and finished so far back in the field it looked like one of the spectators making an early departure.

To those who had hoped for an American car to give the foreign machinery competition, the Corvette was a joke, a rather sick one. To sports car fans, it simply was a hoax—a hog in sheep's clothing. If anyone had suggested, then, that a few years hence the

Corvette would become one of the most successful cars in production racing—that clubs would be formed, and events would be run just for the benefit of Corvettes and Corvette owners—that person would have won a free ride to an observation ward.

This, and more, has come to pass. Within three years of that first event, the Corvette had been transformed into a sports car in the truest sense. It began to dominate its class in racing and, in a short period of time, actually drove the hottest imported machinery in its class, the Mercedes 300 SL, from the field. Today, there are Corvette clubs across the nation, more than 15

chapters in Southern California alone. More Corvettes come out for rallies, slaloms and gymkhanas than any other single make. Not since the days of Duesenberg, Mercer and Stutz has an American product inspired such vigorous enthusiasm and loyalty.

In order for a car to attract this kind of following, it must possess particular qualities. It must have an individual character; it must excel in one or more areas of performance; it must have some sort of history, preferably of racing accomplishments; and, most of all, it must be a car with which a certain driver can identify.

Devotion to a particular automobile

is rarer now than it once was. There was a time when a man's choice of car was as much a clue to his personality as his politics, or his preference for blondes or brunettes. A Ford man was *not* a Chevrolet man; and a Chevrolet man marked the successive stages of his career with the purchase of a Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Buick, LaSalle or Cadillac—definitely not with a Mercury or Lincoln.

OF COURSE, things were simpler then. A Chevrolet was a Chevrolet; it wasn't a Bel Air or an Impala, a Chevelle or Camaro or Corvair—and it didn't range in price all the way up to the cheapest Cadillac. A man didn't have to be a trained zoologist to buy a car; he wasn't getting a Cougar or a Wildcat, a Marlin or Barracuda, he was buying an automobile, a company name; and when he had one, he knew where he stood. So did everyone else.

The proliferation of styles and models, boiled down to Big Three-plus-AMC, has complicated this matter of identity. As labels have become confusing, so has the image of any one make. In this area, Corvette has succeeded, and succeeded surprisingly well: In the decade and a half that it has been built, the Corvette has always been the Corvette.

It started out a small, basically 2-passenger roadster, and—unlike the Thunderbird, which also had early pretensions toward being a sports car—it has remained one. Its objective was to be a dual-purpose car with



track capabilities, and it attained this goal. Corvette became not just a sports car, but an *American* sports car.

In this sense, its character is unique. It was developed along lines quite different from European concepts. The Corvette is heavy and large engined, but it gets the job done on the race track. Beyond this, it is ideal for the sort of long-distance, open-highway driving that is done in the U.S.—whereas many much admired European models are not. It is significant that when Corvette owners talk about "sports cars," they are not referring to Corvettes. They mean *other*

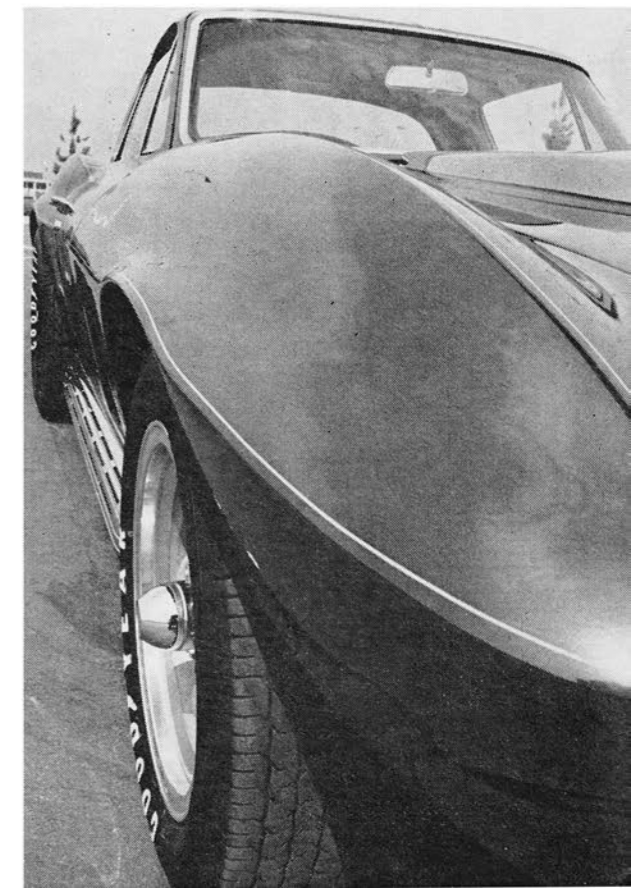
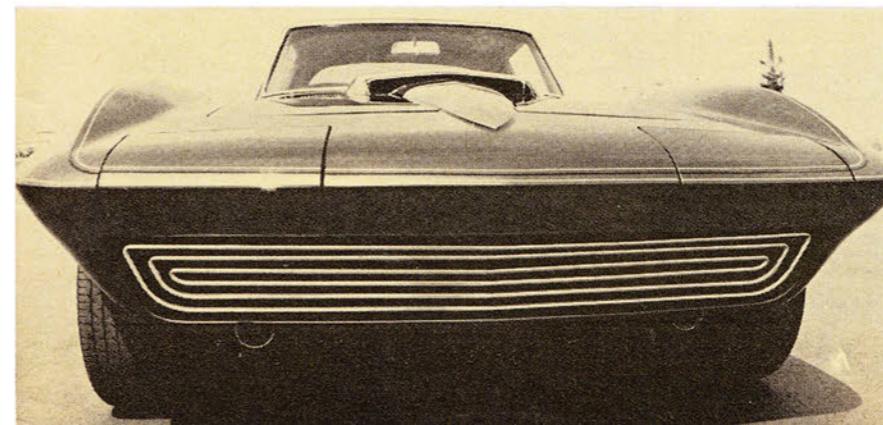
sports cars. They look upon their own as "the same, only different." They are right, and this is high tribute to the Corvette and to the company that builds it.

The Corvette did not become the car it is by accident, but it had some luck going for it. It might have remained the rather attractive, but disappointing beast it started out to be, had not an American war hero and ex-Mercedes-Benz team member named John Fitch taken an interest in it.

IT WAS Fitch who made the rather revolutionary (in this country) suggestion that the breed could best be improved through racing, and who took a team of the cars to the Sebring 12-Hour Race in 1956 and 1957. This story is movingly told in Fitch's biography, "Adventure on Wheels" (G.P. Putnam's Sons). Test driving their cars on the Sebring track, Fitch and his teammates phoned orders to the factory each night, demanding changes in suspension, engine, brakes, steering and chassis. As soon as a new part was designed, it was entered into the Corvette catalog of stock components, and many of these changes showed up on the production models very shortly thereafter.

A second bit of good fortune was interest taken in Corvettes by racing enthusiasts. The incident at Palm Springs, in 1955, was only an early, isolated instance of the continuing effort to get the car to perform. Countless hours of labor and untold amounts

GORDON CHITTENDEN PHOTOS



MYSTIQUE

of money were spent by Chevrolet dealers and private competitors to improve the car, and a great many of their discoveries were incorporated by the factory into series models.

Chevrolet has been astonishingly quick to respond to owners' wishes. For example, most of the phony louvers, vents and air scoops that are so popular with Detroit designers have either disappeared, or been replaced with functional features on the Corvette in recent years. This seems to please owners, who feel that theirs is an essentially "honest" car, one that can deliver all it promises, and more, and does not need foolish ornamentation. It seems likely that a large part of the devotion Corvette owners feel stems from this "feedback" effect at the factory.

THE STRONGEST factor in Corvette's success story, however, has not come from any one man, or group of men. It has come from what only can be called the Corvette "mystique." Something about the car, or at least about its concept, captured the public's imagination from the beginning. Sports car fans, even those dedicated to various European marques, cheered the Corvette's early efforts, and were thrilled by its rise to excellence. Drivers and mechanics sometimes seemed less interested in having a winning Corvette, than in having a Corvette win. Even the Chevrolet Division has behaved rather strangely. It has continued to build and improve an automobile that never has sold in exceptional quantities, and that, according to informed opinion, never has made money [directly] for GM stockholders.

One is left with the feeling that great numbers of people were caught in the desire for the Corvette to succeed; that they wanted a "can-do" piece of machinery that would, in the time-worn phrase, put the fun back in driving; that they wanted, not just a sports car, but an American sports car; and that this sheer weight of desire was the main impulse behind Corvette development.

To a degree, this turning away from European products might have implied a kind of xenophobia, the reverse snobbery that opposes any foreign-made thing, no matter how good. To a much greater extent, however, it was a recognition of the fact that only an American design could satisfy the multiple desires of the majority of American drivers. What was needed was an agile, responsive car, yet one that would be comfortable on long trips. What was needed was a high-

performance, safe cornering, safe stopping car, yet one that any garage mechanic could service. What was needed was a car small enough to be road sensitive, powerful enough to blow off the "rolling living rooms," yet one that could be equipped with air conditioner, stereo tape deck and automatic transmission. What was needed was the Corvette.

SPORTS CAR enthusiasts have one common attitude that confuses other motorists. They seem grateful toward their cars. They wash and polish and pamper them endlessly, and while, to some observers, this might seem mere pride of possession, it is more than that. It is gratitude. The *aficionado* knows he has found a car that suits his personality, that releases a part of his inner self, and, that in a real sense, was created just for him. This feeling, this intimate identification with the machine, sets him apart from other motorists.

It sets the Corvette driver farther apart than most. After all, his car was created just for him, designed and developed in response to the desires and needs of people like himself. Moreover, when he bought his particular model, he was able to improve the combination. He ordered from a list of options long enough to furnish a home. The result is an unusually strong kinship between man and machine, a factor that makes Corvette owners among the most loyal supporters of any breed of car.

The average Corvette man is a distinctive type. He cannot be confused with other sports car owners. He has the typical American fondness for horsepower and, so far as he is concerned, there's no such thing as too much of it. If he buys the 327-cid engine instead of the 427, it's probably because he can't afford the larger displacement unit. He finds nothing strange in equipping a sports car with air conditioner, automatic transmission, or any other power option; he

sees no reason his car shouldn't have perfect comfort, along with everything else. He doesn't regard the Corvette as exotic, and, in fact, considers it a plus that he can find parts to fit it in almost any junk yard. He knows that no other car in the world can make these claims, and he is deeply pleased at his good fortune in owning one that can.

A CORVETTE owner is proud of his car, and this pride is so genuine and so self-confident that he seems to feel no need to knock anyone else. At a recent Corvette meet, several owners were asked to comment on other sports cars. Considering some of the things that have been said about Corvettes by foreign-car lovers ("Great, oil-dripping, glass barges" is representative), their reactions were interesting. Most expressed admiration for the styling of the Jaguar XKE. Most seemed impressed, even a little awed, by the mechanical perfection of the Porsche. Most were quick to admit that the Cobra was a better performing car than their own. Not one suggested that he was interested in trading his Corvette for an XKE, Porsche or Cobra.

More than that, owners agreed strongly that their loyalties extend beyond the Corvette. All said that, if the demands of family or business made it absolutely necessary for them to own a larger car, a sedan or station wagon, the car they would buy would be a Chevrolet.

Corvette owners are grateful.

There's nothing new in all of this. There was a time when the majority of car owners held this kind of corporate loyalty, when men drove Bearcats, and Raceabouts, and Playboys with the perfect confidence that theirs was the only true car, others only the result of compromise or human failing. There were three things about a man one didn't criticize—his wife, his dog and his car. It was part of the magic of owning and driving an automobile. For Corvette owners, this magic remains. ■

