

# AMERICAN BEAUTY



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For eight generations and 70 years, the Chevy Corvette has been the backbone of the US sports car industry. As it turns 60, the C2 remains the most desirable of all

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From top: interior received just as much attention from GM's styling gurus as the exterior; iconic split-window lasted only until '64, but is revered today



When Jaguar launched the E-type in 1961, it was like a bolt of lightning from above. Beautiful, bold and distinctly sporting. Just two years later, another

lightning bolt struck the USA when Chevrolet lifted the covers off the new Corvette Sting Ray.

Even among the American automotive industry's finest new lines for the 1960s, the second-generation Corvette was a stunner. In terms of both styling and speed it was light-years ahead of its predecessor. The first-generation Corvette hadn't been an immediate success, but the Sting Ray was so popular from day one that the St Louis factory had to move to double shifts – and even then couldn't keep up with demand. With a waiting period of two months, buyers paid the list price without hesitation, which was unusual for the deal-hungry American public. Above all else, the immediate appeal of the Sting Ray was the undiluted flair of its sports-car styling.

'Our' C2s come from a jointly owned garage in the small Dutch village of Westzaan, North Holland. The older of the two, the March 1963-built Daytona Blue coupe, spent most of its life in New York State before being imported to The Netherlands in 2006, where it is now cherished by owner Sander van Ballegooij. Michael

'The Sting Ray's lines were far from harmed by the lifting of its lid, even if the early coupe's split window wins so many admirers'

Westenberg's Rally Red convertible is dated September 1965 and was delivered new in Washington, DC, before emigrating in 2004. "It's one of the last 300 of the '65 model year," says Michael, "so it has some 1966 parts. When the original components ran out, they simply installed those from the new line. That's how it was back then." Both owners are sticklers for originality and proud that their cars stand up to the exacting judging standards of the National Corvette Restorers Society.

Split almost equally between the coupe and convertible, 21,513 Sting Rays were made in the C2's first year, but by 1965, when 23,562 rolled out of the factory, two-thirds of production was devoted to meeting the demand for convertibles. Much like its British rival, the C2's lines were far from harmed by the lifting of its lid, even if the iconic split window of the early coupe wins so many admirers.

Its interior is as adventurous as the exterior, just as it was with the C1. Entering the Sting Ray

coupe through a door that takes a small bite out of the roof, you are welcomed by a colour-coded cabin with the signature twin humps of the Corvette dash, between which is a vertically mounted radio and a stack of chromed control knobs. On the passenger side lives a fairly spacious glove compartment, and ahead of the driver sits a full set of beautifully detailed and deeply recessed instruments.

The view ahead follows a full-length bulge down the middle of the bonnet, which you'd think is there to accommodate the air filter, but is too narrow for that and is instead purely for show. The influence of Alfa Romeo's 1952 Disco Volante as a source of inspiration certainly shows. Its dramatic wheelarch and wing flares, amplified by a sharp swage line running the length of the car, have undoubtedly been echoed by Chevrolet's Detroit stylists.

The initial sketch for the 1963 Corvette came from Peter Brock, the man responsible for the Shelby Cobra Daytona coupe, and the idea was then brought to production by designer Larry Shinoda under the direction of legendary General Motors styling chief Bill Mitchell. The 1959 Stingray racer concept had been a preview of Mitchell's European design inspiration, as well as revealing his fascination with deep-sea fish such as sharks and rays.

Shinoda's drawings for the C2 made it to the production stage almost unscathed. He was a key player in the golden age of GM, the period from 1956-'68, in which men such as Ed Cole, Semon 'Bunkie' Knudsen, Mitchell, John De Lorean and engineer (and 'father of the Corvette') Zora Arkus-Duntov did fantastic things. In Shinoda's 12 years at GM, he had a hand in an astounding number of designs, including the Mako Sharks I and II (the inspiration

for the Corvette C3), the Corvair Super Spyder, the Monza GT and the 1967 Camaro Z/28. He also styled Jim Hall's stunningly beautiful racers, the Chaparral 2C and 2D, as part of GM helping to develop them behind the scenes.

As with the C1 Corvette, glassfibre was used for the bodywork, not only because it was light and strong, but also because it was easy to make changes to the design. This was crucial for the American market, where every model year could bring a styling change, and you can see the differences between the two Corvettes here. Ventilation slots have come and gone: the two faux grilles in the bonnet of the blue Sting Ray and the openings in its wings were clearly intended by Shinoda to release heat from the V8, but the tight budget didn't allow Arkus-Duntov to actually use them. In later years they were modified or deleted entirely, as on Michael's convertible. It was a similar case with the grilles in the coupe's B-pillars: closed on this early example, the ventilation was later



From top: crossed flags reveal sporting intent; Stingray prototype became Sting Ray for production; bonnet bulge is just for show; jet-age tail-lights

found to be necessary in order to reduce heat under the large rear glasshouse, although only the left-hand-side vents were opened.

Little was sacrificed to functionality in the Sting Ray's design, even if some practicality remained. The large luggage compartment of the coupe – much bigger than in the convertible – requires some flexibility to access without a bootlid, and then there's that infamous split window. In Shinoda's original sketches, this separating strip was considerably narrower than how it turned out in production, and the motoring press was critical – particularly for the way it obstructed rearward vision. Yet it has since become a defining part of the C2's identity, tracing a line down the Corvette's rear profile like a stingray's venomous tail. Ultimately, however, it only lasted for one model year, after which a single-piece 'screen took its place, and these early cars have since become the most sought-after C2s, reflecting Mitchell's original concept most closely.

When Sander starts his '63 'Vette, the cosy cockpit immediately fills with the warm and mellifluous roar of the V8 – it's civilised, but with a menacing sense of power. All 1963 C2s had the 327cu in (5.4-litre) 'Turbo-Fire' V8 – no turbos, of course, but it does sound fabulous.

This all-iron powerplant was available in several configurations, the most powerful with Rochester injection and 365bhp; Sander's has 300bhp, but it's the 360lb ft of torque that always stood out against the competition – and makes it brutally quick. When *Road & Track* tested an injected Sting Ray with in 1963, it registered 0-60mph in 5.9 secs – although you had to dump the clutch from at least 4500rpm for the perfect amount of V8-powered wheelspin within its ideal rev range. Although it was merely on a par with Carroll Shelby's Cobra, it was considerably faster than a Jaguar E-type, an Aston Martin DB4 and even a 4.9-litre Ferrari, which took

7.4, 8.4 and 6.6 secs respectively to cover the same sprint.

The Corvette's prodigious traction was partly due to its independent rear suspension, which many competitors did not yet have. For Arkus-Duntov, who was already familiar with such set-ups, it had been an absolute must, but budget constraints got in the way of a new rear axle. The determined engineer adapted the front suspension of other Chevrolets, using the driveshafts as upper links, in combination with lower links and trailing arms to support the axle and locate the wheels. There were coil springs at the front, but a transverse leaf spring suspended the rear, mounted on the chassis below the differential. If not quite as sophisticated as Jaguar's independent rear, the layout had been proved in motorsport and the signature set-up would go on to prove effective throughout Corvette history, up to and including the C7.

Disc brakes were also not part of the budget, so Arkus-Duntov used the largest drums that GM had in stock for its full-sized saloons, but with wider, sintered linings. For the 1965 model year, however, the Sting Rays finally got front discs as standard, pleasing budding motorsport enthusiasts and adding some extra marketing sparkle for everyday customers – although 316 buyers that year still chose the delete option and pocketed the \$64.50 discount.

*Road & Track* had recorded a 142mph top speed for the injected Sting Ray, helped in part by the C2's low nose with pop-up headlamps. Yet at very high speeds the Corvette would suffer lift on the front axle and downforce on the rear, a combination that wasn't particularly conducive to straight-line stability.



#### CHEVROLET CORVETTE C2

Sold/number built 1963-'67/117,964

Construction steel perimeter-frame chassis, glassfibre body

Engine all-iron, ohv 5356cc V8, four-barrel Carter AFB carburettor

Max power 300bhp @ 5000rpm

Max torque 360lb ft @ 3200rpm

Transmission three/four-speed

manual or two-speed auto, RWD

Suspension independent, at front

by unequal-length wishbones, coil

springs, anti-roll bar rear transverse

leaf spring, lower links, trailing arms;

telescopic dampers f/r

Steering recirculating ball, optional

power assistance

Brakes drums (discs from 1965)

Length 14ft 7¼in (4450mm)

Width 5ft 9½in (1765mm)

Height 4ft 1¾in (1264mm)

Wheelbase 8ft 2in (2490mm)

Weight 3053lb (1385kg, coupe)

Mpg 14.8 0-60mph 7.5 secs

Top speed 130mph (coupe)

Price new \$4252 (1963, coupe)

Price now £50-70,000



Sting Ray twins at rest. Both examples feature the 327cu in Turbo-Fire V8 (top), which was offered in various tunes

Clockwise from right: convertible's profile works just as well as the coupe's, and the drop-top was the big seller; side pipes add theatre; beautifully detailed filler cap



The split-window's 300bhp feels generous for a car that weighs in at a nudge under 1.5 tonnes. This early model sits on the rare Kelsey-Hayes alloy wheels, with knock-off spinners and shod with pre-radial bias-ply tyres. It also has an original, dealer-installed radio and the optional N11 'Off Road' exhaust system. The reason behind the name is unclear: it does give good clearance, but more likely it is derived from the fact that it is completely shrouded from view, aside from the two discreet tailpipes, unlike the more flashy post-'65 side-pipe option.

Next we switch to Michael's '65 convertible, which features vents in the front wings that resemble a shark's gills, for cooling the brakes, and sits on the same rare alloys as Sander's coupe. This time there are those \$134.50 optional side-pipes, which don't just look great, but also deliver the creamy roll of V8 thunder in full stereo, as unfettered as possible.

The drop-top's bright white and lipstick red two-tone interior is a rare option on the C2, but immediately inspires the summer feeling so natural to a Corvette convertible. Not that it's an ergonomic masterpiece. The seat cushions are as flat as Bonneville's salt and the steering wheel is huge, its thin rim protruding towards you, while the pedals are so big and far apart that heel-and-toeing is not worth attempting. Yet both have a special feeling on the road, only amplified in the convertible because it gives access to even more of the V8's sound.

In 1965, Chevrolet introduced the option of a big-block, 369cu in (6.5-litre) V8 with 420bhp to top the range above the four versions of the 327. In 1967 that was followed by a 427cu in

(7-litre) motor with 430bhp, listed with the code L71, and there was also the 500bhp L88 option said to be intended for motorsport – only 20 L88-code Sting Rays were delivered.

Although the big-blocks did have a larger capacity, the name was actually attributed to the size of the bottom end, with the larger cylinders distanced further apart than in the 327. And yet the Sting Ray feels far from short-changed with the 300bhp 327, able to leave almost every contemporary car behind and even taking up the gauntlet with cheeky challengers in modern traffic. With 360lb ft of torque, there is always enough pulling power

*'There is a feeling of lazy, long-stroke thrust, the easy pace and stirring soundtrack giving it a wonderfully relaxed attitude'*

under the pedal and in almost any gear.

To accelerate in a 427 is an unforgettable, brutal, spectacular experience, but the 327 is smoother and more harmonious than its rather violent sibling. It is also 35kg better off, and reverses the weight distribution from 52:48 front to rear to give a surprising rearward bias.

There is an immediate feeling of lazy, long-stroke American V8 thrust when you set off in the C2, its easy performance, stirring soundtrack and the sense of the longevity for which these engines have earned their fame

giving it a wonderfully relaxed attitude. The technology is simple: pushrods, eight spark plugs, 16 valves, a cast-iron block and no fuss. The V8 can be stirred into giving a donkey-kick response, yet the gentle biting point of the clutch means you can sweep away surprisingly gracefully. The gearbox, too, makes for easy changes in comparison with the heavier, more mechanically stressed affairs of later 'Vettes.

Fast cornering can be a challenge, however. Even a 327 gathers pace more rapidly than you expect, and communication from the chassis isn't immediate, particularly on radial tyres. The power-assisted steering is light and feels as

if it's not connected to anything at first, but as soon as you begin to pick up speed it returns some sense of feedback. It is also fairly quick, with ratios between 19.6:1 and 17:1 that can be adjusted at the steering arms. Although there is always a certain vagueness to the helm, you soon begin to sense how

those tall tyres are bending. Ultimately, the Corvette needs a bit of space to be stretched with real confidence. Like in a Cobra, you don't gain time in the corners with a Sting Ray, but on the stretches of road that connect them. Once you accept that, it really performs and offers driving pleasure in abundance.

Behind it are the qualities of a legend: a true Stateside original, with massive performance and glorious looks. Daring, successful and unsurpassed among Corvettes, the C2 might just be America's greatest sports car. 



From top: red-and-white scheme adds to the jukebox glitz of the Sting Ray's cabin; glassfibre allowed the stylists to go to town with the shape

