

# Sports casuals

If you're about to buy an E-type V12 you should read this: we reckon the '73 Corvette Stingray coupe - at up to five grand less than a good V12 'E' fixed head - is a serious big-gun alternative. If you can stomach the image you might just be buying a better drive too, says Martin Buckley



TONY JAKER

**E**-type versus Corvette is a classic '60s big sports car set-piece. It goes like this: Vette gets a grudging commendation for its straight-line speed but E-type triumphs - decisively - as a more sophisticated all-rounder. E-type drives off with the laurels, Corvette skulks in the shadows, condemned as a fast but essentially crude colonial Airfix kit, never a serious contender anyway.

Fast-forward to the early '70s - Series III V12 E-type versus 'Coke-bottle' Stingray - and the outcome of such a face-off isn't so clear cut. The character of the cars, and their place in the scheme of things, is not so well defined.

The '71 Jaguar is faster but uglier while the Corvette has lost some performance but looks better than ever. The Jag is still the more sophis-

ticated drive - with a V12 under the bonnet it could hardly be otherwise - but it's become fat and lazy. The Vette has gone the luxu-GT route too, yet without selling its sports car soul down the river in the process.

So, could '70s Corvette be a better car than '70s E-type? At up to £5000 less, we reckon the Corvette - if you can get past the image - is a credible Jaguar alternative.

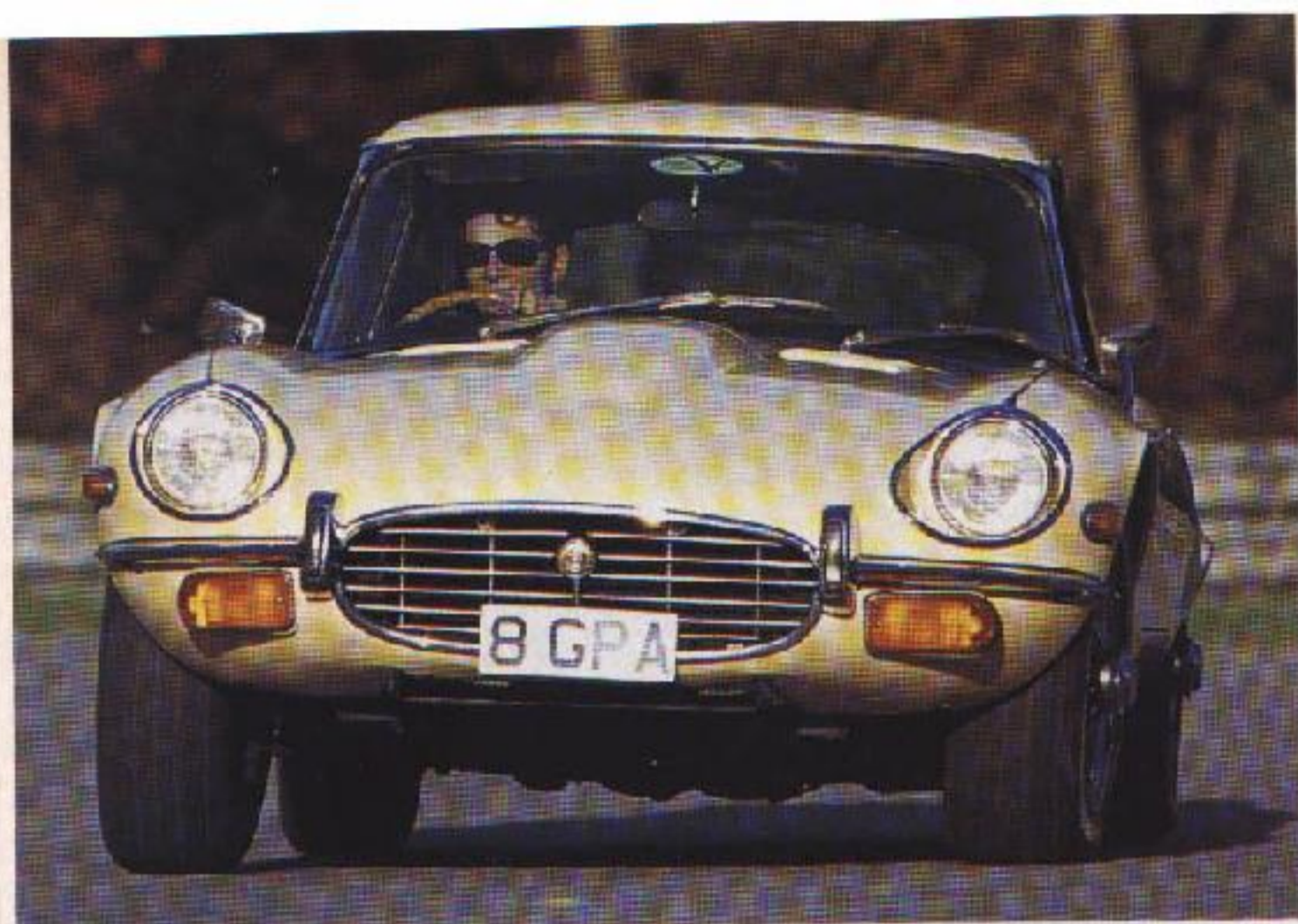
## THE CARS

The E-type remains one of the all-time bargains of its day: no car before or since has offered the exotic glamour of 12 pots and near 150mph performance at such an affordable price.

A rapid yet double-cream-smooth drive, high on torque and head-turning power, the Series

III E-type is still a lot of car in the performance per pound stakes, especially if you go for the less fashionable, but more practical, fixed head.

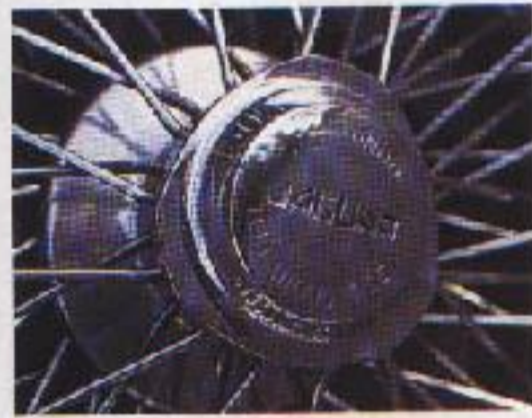
But what of our challenger, the Corvette Stingray? It's a car with all the presence and most of the performance of the Jaguar that engenders equally powerful marque loyalty. Here is a car with a racing pedigree and a long, proud lineage dating from the early '50s. It's a far more successful car than the Jaguar in sales terms of course: in 1973 - one the car's best sales years - Chevrolet sold nearly 26,000 Corvettes. Barely 15,000 E-types dribbled out of the gates of Browns Lane between 1971 and 1975. The last few V12 E-types were not easy to sell, whereas the same basic Corvette shape lived well into the '80s.



**E-type is soft with more body roll than Corvette. Tail comes out much earlier too**

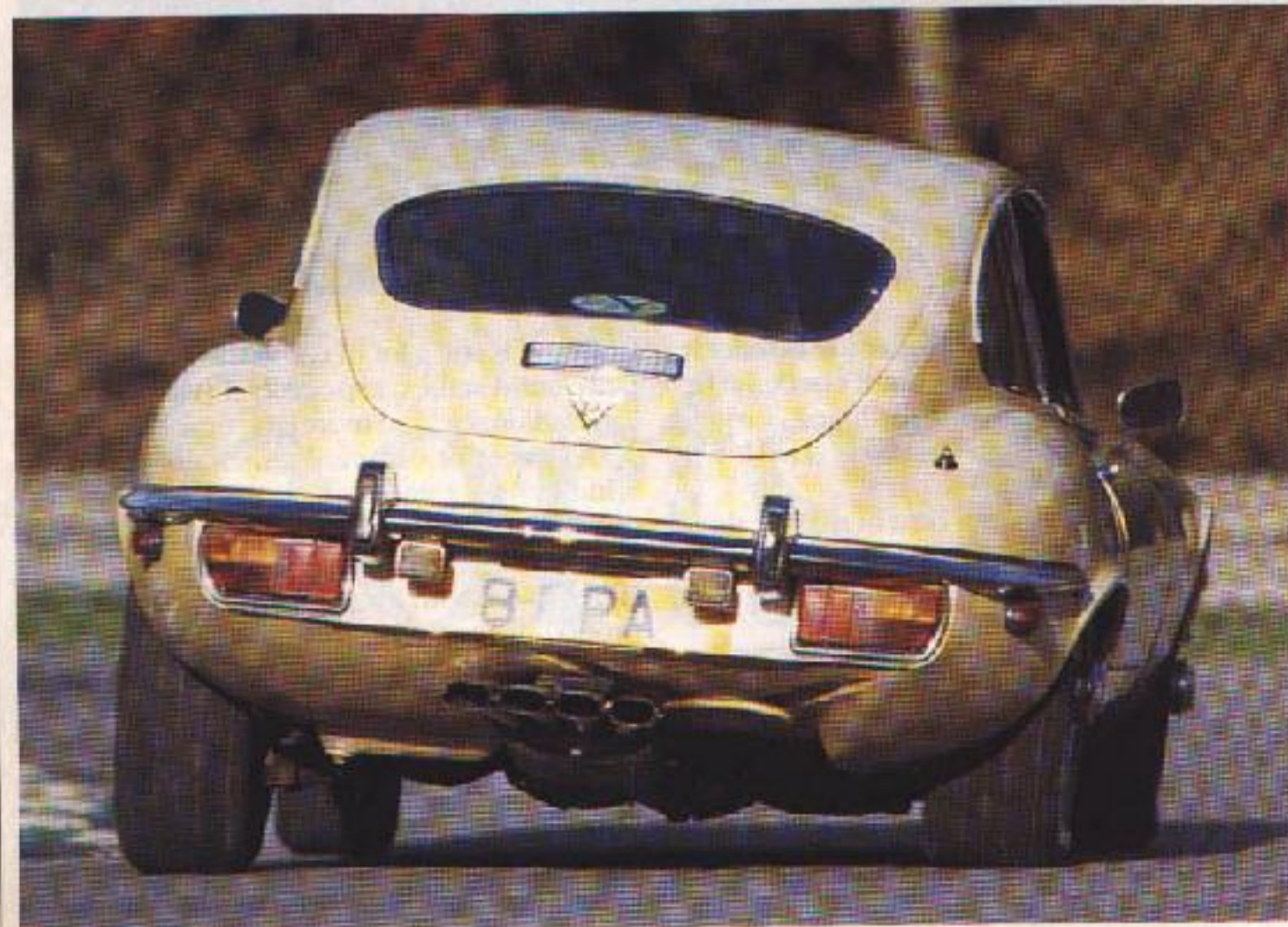
### E-TYPE V12 2+2

Engine	alloy inc V12
Capacity	5343cc
Fuel system	four Zeniths
Power bhp/rpm	272/5850
Torque lb ft/rpm	304/3600
Bhp/ton	188
Transmission	four-speed manual
Mph/1000rpm in top	22.9
Suspension, front	w-banes, torsion bars
Suspension, rear	lower links, recius arms, twin coils each side
Steering	rack, powered
Brakes	discs all round
Max speed	142mph
0-60mph	6.4 secs
Standing 1/4 mile	14.2 secs
Mpg	15
Production	2215
Price new (1971, UK)	£3369



**Fat tyres and V12 badge on boot lid show this is an S3**

**Alloy V12 gives the E turbine-like performance**



Its classic Mako Shark dream-car-derived body has a singular brutal elegance. Its broad snout and theatrically flared wing/bonnet profile has a sense of design unity and integrity denied the Jaguar. Perhaps only the plasticky interior lets the 'Vette down aesthetically, next to the classically neat and businesslike Jag cabin, so traditional in its furnishings.

With its heavily sunken fallaway dials and cheap, fussy detailing, the Corvette is a difficult car to take seriously from the inside. It's tighter on space, with no outside access to the boot compartment and no rear seats. The Jaguar, by contrast, has a foldaway bench you can actually use on short trips and a useful rear door.

The Stingray in this showdown is an L82 coupe, not one of the 7-litre monsters eased out of production earlier in the '70s. With 250bhp from its simple pushrod 5.7-litre V8, it uses a sublime three-speed automatic gearbox that can shift gears more sweetly than any human.

The style dates from 1968 (this 1973 car is the first with the deformable nose and radial tyres), the steel ladder chassis with its transverse leaf rear suspension from 1963. Despite that glassfibre body, it manages to weigh in heavier than the 'E' at 3520lb at the kerb.

You can buy it today, from Tom Falconer of Claremont Corvette, for £8995; if that sounds cheap, it's worth remembering that a pukka big-block convertible could still bring £20 grand in good condition.

"The E-type was a fundamentally more expensive car," says Tom, who has championed 'Vettes in the UK for 20 years. "But the Stingray should have lasted much

better because of the glassfibre." Everything for the car is still available and Tom doesn't even stock non-specific engine parts, because they are so freely and cheaply available elsewhere.

Henry Pearman of Eagle Racing furnished us with the primrose yellow E-type V12 two-plus-two, though his usual stock in trade is the six cylinder cars. Originally an American market left-hooker, this 'E' belongs to a customer, and he isn't selling. You could easily buy something similar for maybe £15,000.

"The best thing about the V12 is its practicality and the flexibility of the engine. It's got better legroom and access than the sixes, and more space for luggage," says Pearman, who much prefers the S1 and S2 cars as driving machines. "During the boom, the V12 was the most valuable E-type - something to do with the mystique of 12 cylinders and 'last-of-the-line' appeal - but I think it's a completely different car to the 'six'. Drivers are buying E-types now because they want the car, not as an investment. So sixes are worth a little more if anything." The V12 S111 fixed-head is a surprisingly rare car in right-hand-drive form. Just 2115 were built in a two-year production run - the

convertible went on until 1975.

The E-type presents no parts difficulties – the supply of classic Jaguar parts is a big industry – but with its vulnerable steel monocoque it will present more rot worries than the 'Vette.

Its alloy sohc per bank, in-piston combustion chamber 5.3 V12 engine (only 65lb heavier than the iron-block XK) is a silken, free-revving gem. Its only shortcoming is a certain sensitivity to overheating. Match it to a four-speed manual gearbox and you've got a massively flexible two-plus-two coupé. But autos also suit the character of the V12 well, reckons Pearman.

## DRIVING

With more power and less weight, the E-type has the edge off the line. Creamy smooth with a fine, linear throttle movement working four Strombergs, the Jag gallops undramatically away; you get lots of urge delivered with an even, steady, unrelenting surge.

The torque curve should tell you as much:

the V12 does its best work between 1500 and 5700rpm, though it should rev cleanly and willingly to over 7000rpm; 5000rpm is generally more than enough to rocket the E past a line of dawdlers, its voice a smooth, quality hum – oddly nondescript – becoming a harder, more gutsy growl as the revs nudge 6000rpm. The heavily-deadened wuffle from the four tailpipes is distinctive, classy.

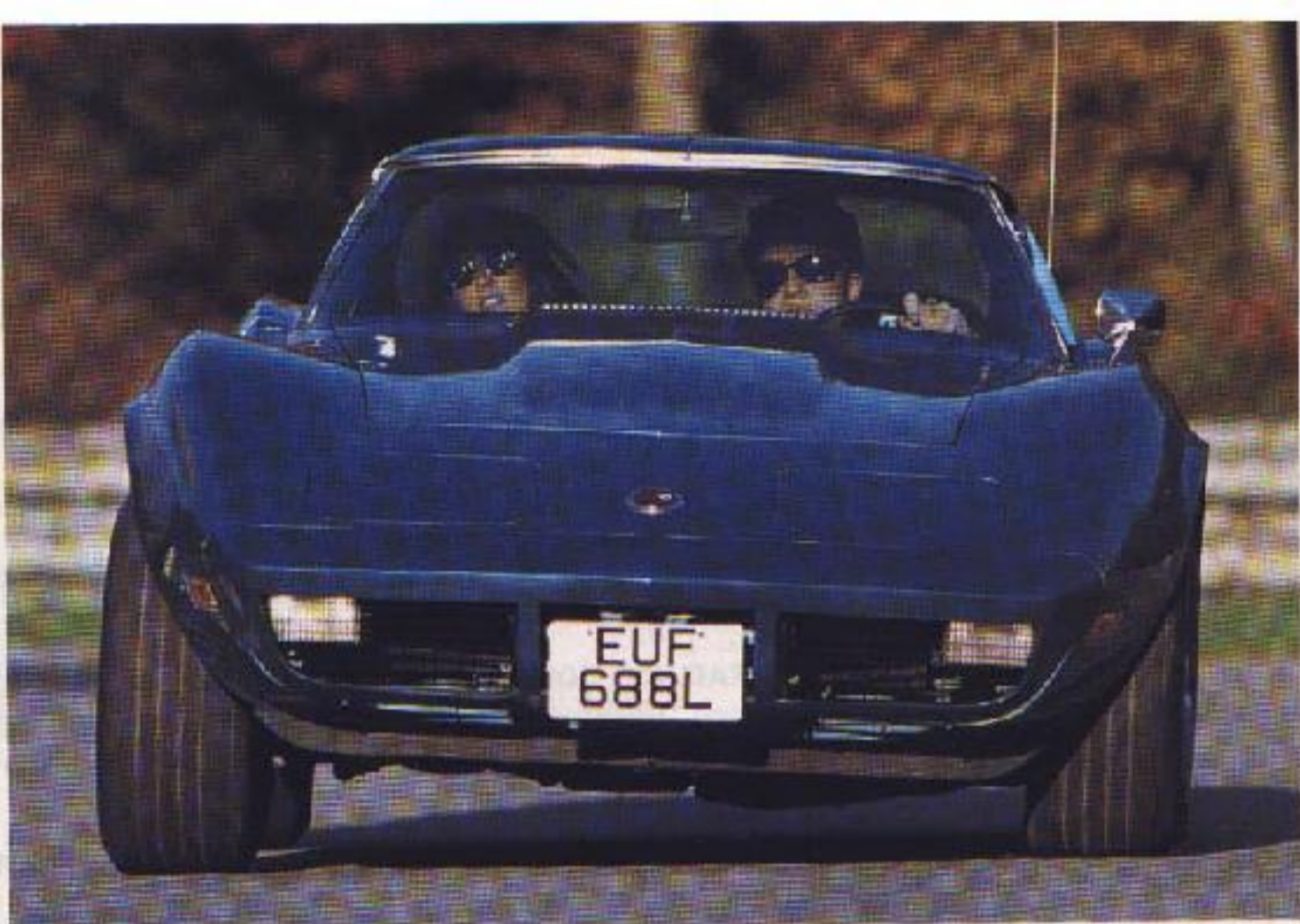
The clutch is heavy and you need to be decisive with the slightly notchy, but precise, gearchange to get a clean shift before the revs drop away.

The ratios seem well spaced but, so massive is the engine's torque, first and top are all you need most the time. And top seems too low: even at very low speeds you're looking for a fifth, which means that motorway cruising, in what should be a consummate top gear slogger, is fussier than it needs to be. Seventy mph equates to 3200rpm.

One dab of the Corvette's throttle to prime the Rochester four-barrel and the V8 fires. It's gruff and rumbly with a loud, off-beat muscle-car snarl that grabs instant attention.

Despite the anti-smog equipment, which was beginning to take a grip by 1973, the Corvette feels impressively strong and willing on the road without delivering quite the authoritative muscle of the E-type. It gets close though. Throttle floored, the GM400 box makes clean, incisive shifts, each gear snapping cleanly into the next as the revcounter winds around to 5500rpm. It gallops up to 100mph with disdainful ease, though the induction roar as the big four-barrel gulps cold air makes such treatment an ear-bashing experience.

By holding the gears, easy with the handy central selector, you can wind the smooth hydraulic-lifter L82 engine to 6500rpm. Coming down the gears you press the detent



Corvette is more stiffly sprung and has wider track. Cornering positive and crisp



CORVETTE STINGRAY	
Engine	pushrod iron V8
Capacity	5737cc
Fuel system	Rochester four-barrel
Power bhp/rpm	250/5200
Torque lb ft/rpm	285/4000
Bhp/ton	159
Transmission	three speed auto
Mph/1000rpm in top	25
Suspension, front	w-bones, coils
Suspension, rear	transverse leaf, lower links, radius arms
Steering	recirculating ball, powered
Brakes	discs all round
Max speed	124mph
0-60mph	7.2 secs
Standing 1/4 mile	15.5 secs
Mpg	14
Production	29,661
Price new (1971 UK)	£5094

5.7-litre V8 lacks upper end muscle of the Jaguar V12

Cropped tail of Corvette is neat and pretty



**ALFA MONTREAL: £6-10,000**

137mph, 0-60 7.6 secs, 17mpg  
**For:** crone '70s looks, musical four-cam V8, rarity  
**Against:** ornate '70s looks, engine very expensive to put right, disappointing handling, rust  
**Sum-up:** oddball for the brave

**ASTON DBS (6 cyl): £8-22,000**

144mph, 0-60 7.1 secs, 10.9mpg  
**For:** handcrafted feel, muscular looks, manual Vantage quick  
**Against:** too big; autos slow and Vantage thirsty  
**Sum-up:** first step on the Aston ladder

**BMW 3.0 CSI: £3-6000**

139mph, 0-60 7.5 secs, 21mpg  
**For:** looks, lovely engine, so cheap

**THE ALTERNATIVE '70s SUPERCARs**

**Against:** rot, tail-heavy handling

**Sum-up:** a well-sorted CSI is a fine-value gem

**DE TOMASO LONGCHAMP: £4-16,000**

149mph, 0-60 7 secs, 15mpg  
**For:** quick, restrained Ghia styling  
**Against:** lack of quality  
**Sum-up:** no pedigree, churn

**FERRARI 400/400i: £10-22,000**

156mph, 0-60 8 secs, 9mpg  
**For:** elegant four-seater, musical V12  
**Against:** lots of rough ones, expensive to own, early auto thirsty  
**Sum-up:** cheapest V12 Ferrari, can be a nightmare

**FIAT DINO COUPE: £5-10,000**

130mph, 0-60 8.7 secs, 20mpg  
**For:** lovely Ferrari V6, handles well, smooth looks, still cheap  
**Against:** no 'name', heavy restoration and running costs  
**Sum-up:** no point buying a rough one

**JAGUAR XJ-5 (pre HE): £2-4000**

153mph, 0-60 6.9 secs, 17mpg (man)  
**For:** fast, refined, fine V12 engine  
**Against:** early cars thirsty, hardly fashionable  
**Sum-up:** a great car if you can live with the looks

**JENSEN INTERCEPTOR: £5-13,000**

133mph, 0-60 7.3 secs, 12mpg  
**For:** handsome, singular styling, lots of urge, simple to service.

**Against:** fairly crude, thirsty, rot-prone  
**Sum-up:** superior Ford Capri

**LAMBORGHINI ESPADA: £9-25,000**

150mph, 0-60 7.8secs, 16mpg  
**For:** cool looks, magnificent four-cam V12, a proper four-seater  
**Against:** pray the engine stays in one piece, styling not to all tastes.  
**Sum-up:** still unique among supercars

**MERCEDES 450 SLC: £4-10,000**

136mph, 0-60 9 secs, 20mpg  
**For:** roomy, reliable, beautifully made  
**Against:** hardly rare, can seem dull  
**Sum-up:** makes sense



Corvette feels cheap but cosy inside



All V12 E-types use uglier 2+2 bodyshell. Flared arches and big grille special to V12



Distinctive Mako Shark-inspired 'Vette shape launched '68 and lived into the '80s



E-type cockpit is simple and classy

button to shift manually but, up the box, the lever moves freely. The kickdown only works below about 60mph. At low speeds, the Corvette is a very easy drive; the car simply motors around in top as much as it can.

As with the E, motorway driving dates the Corvette. The gearing is too low and wind rustles around the frameless door glasses. The T-roof creaks a bit, too.

Where the Corvette scores over the E-type is in its more rewarding handling. It just feels much more of a sports car. Stiffly sprung and with impressive, virtually neutral, steering balance, it feels confident and secure through any kind of smoothly surfaced, fast, open corner. With little roll and plenty of traction, it turns in crisply; grip at the rear is almost impossible to break unless you twist the wheel provocatively, or simply enter corners too fast.

All this is on dry, smooth roads of course. On

less ideal surfaces, the 'Vette's ride gets stiff and jiggly. You sense its limited wheel movement and separate chassis taking hold. The brakes, too, remind you that this is a yank: after a dozen hard stops the pedal goes to jelly.

The E-type has a superb ride for a 20-year-old sports car. It approaches the levels of silken isolation achieved by the then-contemporary XJ6, though soft springing means the car bottoms easily at both ends.

It feels the more sophisticated drive, yet it hasn't the cornering powers of the Corvette. It rolls more, initially understeers more, breaks away earlier at the back, and has less responsive steering.

Its limits, in fact, are quite low and it's fun to provoke and then catch the tail, which can snap out quite suddenly under power. A flick of opposite gets it straight again and by most standards the power steering is quick enough.

It just lacks the feel that warns of front-end

breakaway, the sort of precision, familiar to owners of the earlier 4.2 E-type, that allows you to set up and place the car accurately. Driven briskly, the E feels like a sporty XJ12 with more road noise and less cornering power.

**VERDICT**

The E-type doesn't add up to the sum of its sophisticated parts. As a facelift of a classic, decade-old sports car, it doesn't rate highly in my estimation. It's too soft to be a proper sports car, too elderly in its engineering essentials to be a proper GT. If you want a real driver's E-type, it has to be a 'six'.

The Corvette is much truer to its original design ideals. It's crude and unpleasant in many of its details, yet it feels like a sports car: fast, taut and chuckable - so much better than you expect. Despite its rarity in the UK, it should be the more practical car to own and drive regularly: no-rust bodywork, a chassis like a jeep and utter mechanical simplicity.

CLASSIC



Thanks to: Clement Corvette (01634 388888) and Eagle Racing (01825 830966) for their help