

'DEAR CORVETTE'

Our rotund road-tester loses the last of his marbles and writes a love letter to an L-82 Corvette

Dear Corvette:

Happy Birthday! Not many of the other magazines—*none*, in fact—have made very much about the fact that you're 20 years old this year and as desirable as ever!

It's funny how age catches up with all of us. Just a few years ago, it seems, you were a hot-blooded, lusty sports car with a stiff ride and hypertense engines that couldn't seem to sit still long enough to allow me to swallow the last of my Coke before roaring off again to the next drive-in looking for a run.

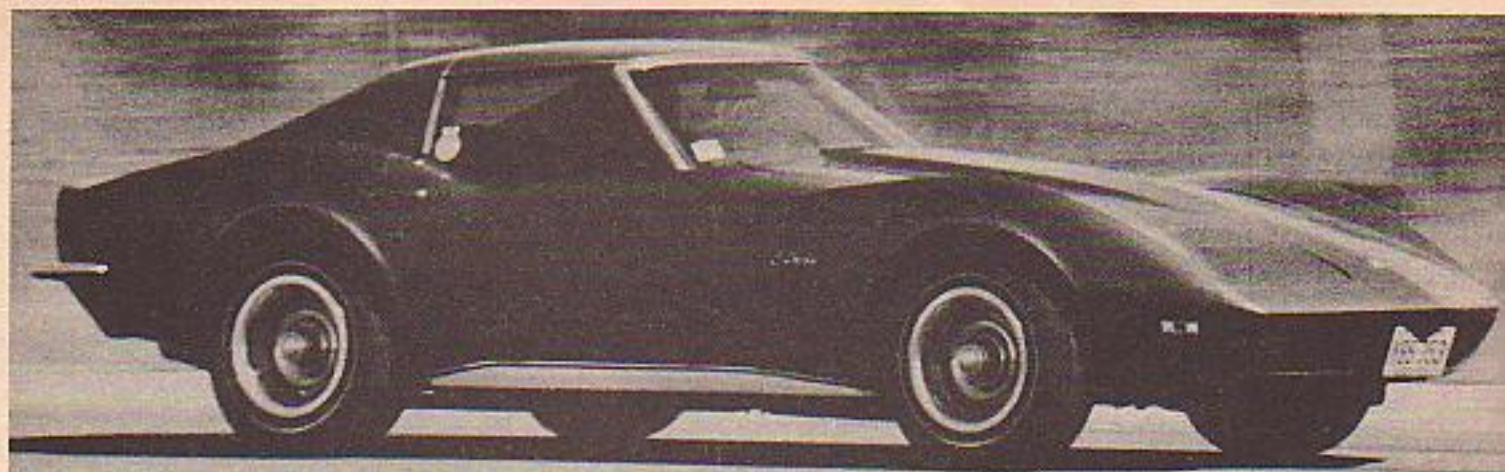
Today, Corvette, you're very much the civilized luxury grand tourer more at home cruising at 80 on the open road than blasting away from a stoplight with your rear tires smoking and squealing. In effect, you've come full circle, haven't you? Twenty years ago, the day you were born and up until the time you were around two or three years old, your Chevrolet mentors thought of you more as a boulevard sporty car rather than a blood and guts out-and-out sports car.

Remember those early days of '53, '54 and '55? Then you only came in one color: white. The first two years of your existence, you had to be content with feeding through three carbs on a Stovebolt Six engine. Six cylinders in a Corvette. Who would believe it today?

Yet, that's how it was.

You were sort of an orphan around the Chevrolet Division. Remember? Almost an outcast; no one knew quite what to do with you; some guys wanted to keep you as you were—a soft touch for any 2-seater T-Bird on the road. You were pretty flabby and slow in those early years and any good running 292 V-8 Thunderbird could blow you into the weeds. And there were those guys in Chevrolet

BY JOE OLDHAM



who wanted you to stay that way—"a soft touch." Then a blessed event happened. You were adopted. Remember that day? Zora Arkus-Duntov had just been appointed Chief Development Engineer for the Corvette. He came out to the back garage where you were parked and sort of patted you on the fiberglass bonnet and smiled. Little did you know that day that he was planning to turn you into a snarling V-8 engined, 4-speed shifted, dual-quad drinking beast that could suck up and spit out just about any car on the road!! Over the next 14 or 15 years, he did just that. Can you remember some of the highlights? The 283 fuel-injected engine in '57 along with the 4-speed transmission; the 327 in '62; the new Sting Ray body in '63, along with *fully-independent suspension*; the 396 big block in '65; the 4-wheel disc brakes the same year; the 427 in '66; the L-88 in '68 along with the Mako Shark styling; the ZL-1; the . . . ; the . . .

That's all there is, Corvette. The past few years have been lean ones for you, engineeringwise, haven't they? The air pollution problem put a big dent in your act a few years ago and you never have recovered. Of late, your engines have been growing weaker and weaker because of the addition of all kinds of smog equipment and your body has been growing a little fatter and a little heavier every year. This year, for instance, they added around 45 pounds of additional sound deadener to make you quieter inside. I have to admit, you're the *quietest*, most comfortable Corvette I've ever driven. And I've owned and driven many of your brothers since you were born 20 years ago. Some of the comfort comes from softening up the spring rates which brings the ride down to the firm-yet-stable level. I like the new ride very much but it does take a little bit more away from the image you once had. In addition to your weaker engine, you are getting to look a little oldish around the edges. Your new '73 nose job helps a lot.



Facing page, top: at speed, the Corvette is one of the most stable cars on the road; coming (below) was almost dead flat. This page, left: Jones (front) and Oldham discuss merits of the L-82 engine. Above: Corvette wasn't at home on the Englishtown dragstrip; performance was, in fact, a far cry from the halcyon days of the famed L-88 'Stemper Motor.' Below: road course made the Vette a little happier than the dragstrip.



As a matter of fact, your '73 body is the cleanest looking of the Mako Shark series, but let's face it, you haven't had a facelift since 1968.

Six years is a long time for any car to go without donning some new curves. And in '68, your styling was a takeoff on the '64 Ferrari GTO. So in effect, your styling is nine years old; it's dated; it's not your fault and oldish styling doesn't make you a bad car. It's just that, well,

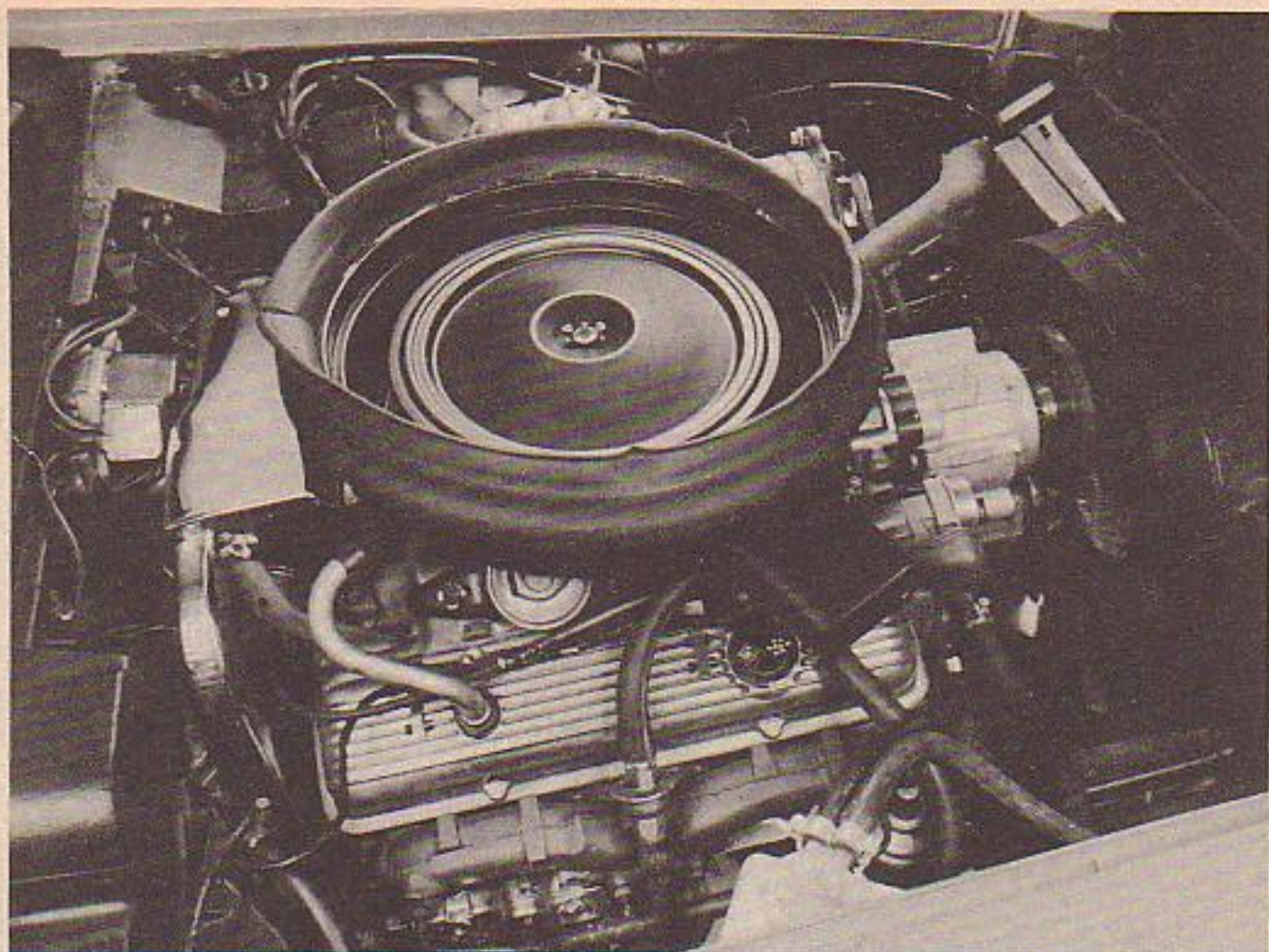
I like you and I hate to see your once snappy image deteriorate rapidly. When the newest Ferraris and Maseratis and Panteras pass by with their new-wave, flat-plain-ans-wedge styling, I almost cry. You can do everything they can do. Well almost, if they'd only give you a new body.

Still, you have a lot going for you, Corvette. When I picked you up at Briggs Chevrolet in South Amboy, NJ, I must admit that you still made the adrenalin pump a little and my heart was racing as Danny Zach, Briggs president, handed me the keys. It's not that Corvettes like you scare me or anything. As you know, I've owned a couple of your brothers in years past. Still, any Corvette is something special to me.

Driving you around those first few days, I found out something I had guessed. You still turn heads. Even though they've sold about 30,000 of your cousins every year for the past few years, people still look twice at you. It's still a big ego trip to drive you around and watch the faces of people, especially women, as you drive by. A few of them even ask for rides. Right on!

After driving you around for over 6000 miles, and that's the longest test we've ever done on a Corvette, I've formed some definite conclusions and impressions about you, as you can well imagine.

First of all, I can't really recommend your L-82 engine. It simply doesn't make it. As you know, Corvette, it's a smog version of the strong LT-1 that you offered optionally a few years ago. However, your '73 version carries a milder hydraulic cam, low-rise, cast-iron manifold and a Quadrajet 4-barrel in place of the solid lifter stick, high



Performance of the 1973 L-82 (Z/28) 350 CID V-8 engine was disappointing. Standard mill or the 454 is the way to go.

rise aluminum manifold and Holley that we've come to expect on the high performance small-block engine. As such, your L-82 option doesn't have any low end torque and runs out of breath on top end. It loses both ways. Even the standard 3.73 gears don't help much.

We'd have to recommend either of your other engines to anyone contemplating purchasing one of your brothers this year. The standard 350 cube 190 horse engine is perfect for cruising and commuting especially when teamed with a 3-speed Turbo Hydra-Matic transmission and optional 3.36 rear axle ratio. This powertrain has plenty of balls for on-ramp acceleration and cruises effortlessly at anything up to 110 mph.

The 454 hydraulic motor has even more balls and scads of low end torque. But 9 miles per gallon is a thing of my past and the big-block makes you too noseheavy so that you don't handle like your small block brothers.

So Corvette, if I were buying you this year, I'd stick with the standard engine, save money and be happy all at the same time.

There's no doubt that your *new-for-'73* GR70-15 steel belted radial tires make a big difference in your overall feel. Traction isn't much better on dry roads over your former F70-15 bias ply tires. However, *wet road traction is up a welcome 15 percent* and your transient response is fantastic. The radials make your steering feel even quicker, although your actual ratio hasn't changed. By the way, your power steering is still one of the best. Not too much assist and plenty of road feel. That's the way every power steering unit should be.

Handling and stability is still superb in any kind of driving. You still eat up turnpikes with no sweat and you don't dip or wallow over undulations.

One thing I've always liked about you, Corvette, is your secure feeling over any type of road. You haven't changed here and I still love you for it. You still can storm back roads with aplomb at speeds that would have other cars dizzy and gasping.

AKT Raceway Park in Englishtown, N.J., you didn't do too badly: 0-to-60 in 7.8 seconds and the quarter mile in 15 seconds-flat at 86 mph. But I could tell

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DEAR 'VETTE

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you were a little uncomfortable there. You've mellowed with age and you just don't enjoy a good dragstrip session the way you used to. It's understandable.

You were a little happier when we switched you over to the road course. But you still didn't really smile until we headed for home and the open road. Once you stretched out and unwound a little, you were your old comfortable self ready to please me in every way including transporting me with style and speed to my destination.

One thing I must complain about—your heating and ventilation controls. They're really archaic, Corvette. I hate to be the one to tell you. But your little console-mounted wheels that take six turns lock to lock to dial in fresh air or defrosting or whatever, went out with the flood. A good pushbutton system would be quicker, easier to use and much more efficient. In addition, I wouldn't have to take my eyes off the road to find out what mode of operation your heating/ventilation controls are in.

Also, the air conditioning system you have is pretty poor. It seems to blow a lot and make noise but not much cool air comes out. I think this may be an idiosyncrasy of you only, though, and not representative of all your brothers.

And so what of the future? Have they told you anything about your new body that's supposed to be on you in 1975? What about a mid-engine design that's rumored? And how about Wankel power? Are you going to get a 4-rotor Wankel that pumps out 400 horsepower while emitting so few emissions that your engine will actually be an air purifier! I hope all these things come to pass for you, Corvette, because you could use a little lift right about now. Meanwhile, I'll just go on enjoying you as you are.

Best always,

Joe