

PHOTO BY DON GREEN

# The Fiberglass Fantasy

Through the wonders of plastic technology and efficient cost control, we bring you our evaluation of the '73 two-seat Camaro . . . er, Corvette

**BY NORM MAYERSOHN** ■ To many people the Corvette has always been the most desirable car built in this country, a vehicle that provides everything they want in performance and status. For some, a craving for the car is a natural part of the American Dream, regardless of their feelings toward Chevrolets. The Corvette has become a legend in its own time because it is a street car with an amazing amount of character and a fair amount of agility,

not because of any romantic racing history or transatlantic origin. It is simply a fast way to get from A to B with a maximum of comfort.

The Mako Shark styling theme is now in its sixth year of production, a long time by anybody's standards except Volkswagen's. For '73, the side scoop behind the front wheel is restyled, but essentially the car is the same as it was in 1968. The front bumper is now the same color as the rest of the car, but

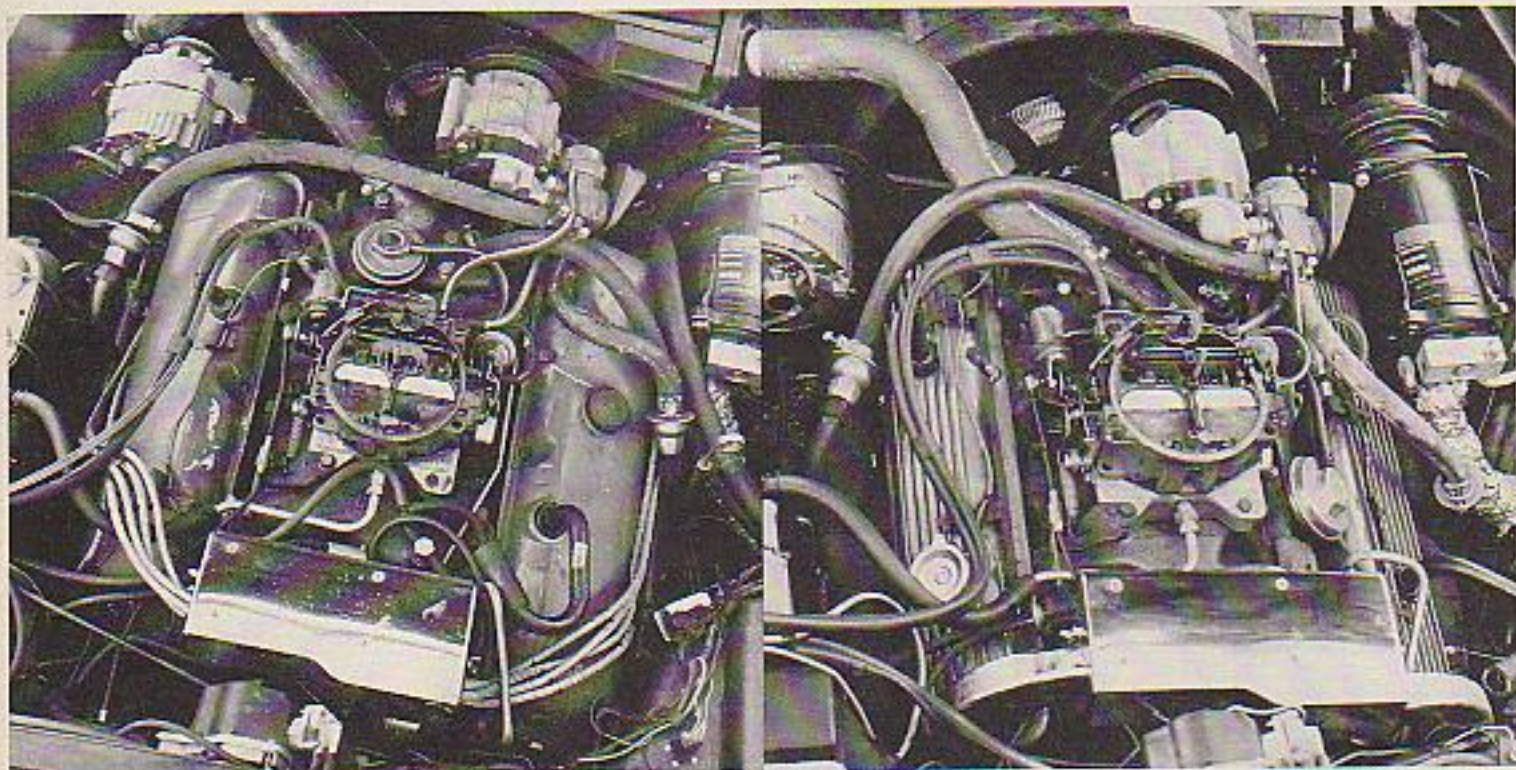
it isn't exactly the Endura original that would make so much sense on a car with an extraordinarily long nose. It is a flexible plastic cover over a metal bumperette and the 5 mph impact tests have been met with breakaway "nonrecoverable" brackets. It is one of many things on the car that seems to be a beg-off, an appeal to bear this body style one more year until Zora and the boys get around to springing the mid-engine Magical Mystery car on us.

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# Fantasy

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ABOVE—Keystone Rogues and Firestone F60's replace the stock slotted wheels and radials.

TOP—The LS-4 and L-82 motors both fill the Vette engine compartment fully, but are easy to service considering the amount of optional equipment.

'Till then we are doomed to a bland coexistence with a species nearing extinction.

The signs of an atrophied economy are all over the car: simple Impala style hidden wipers replace the electrically raised door of other post-1968 Vettes, the fiber optic taillight indicators have been gone for a couple of years and the car comes with but one ungraciously styled outside rear view mirror that is not even remote controlled. And there is no excuse for a car of the Corvette's price not having reclining seat backs.

We test drove two Corvettes, a 350ci, L-82 model, and an LS-4, 454ci version. The big-block was not allowed in California last year due to emission certification problems, but everything is in order again. There is not a marked difference in the performance of the two differently powered Vettes, though the extra torque of the rat can be well appreciated in around town driving. On the long straightaway reserved for maniacal top speed blasts, it's a stand-off, the big-block car running out of breath and room before it can fully wind out. In short, the 454-powered car offers no great advantage in overall performance, especially when the extra gas consumption is computed into the picture. A spin through the OCIR quarter mile (both on the same day)

gave us a best of 14.98/90 for the L-82, and the LS-4 was slightly ahead at 14.76/93.

The 454-powered thumper has several advantages over the small-block car in other departments, though. It comes with deep groove pulleys for the fan belts and a considerably heavier duty suspension. The small-block car exhibited excessive body roll and gave a distinct feeling of side to side (lateral) weight transfer when a change of direction was made. This can get you in plenty of trouble in a very quick lane change situation or on a road with consecutive switchback turns. The 454 was somewhat more poised due to its higher rate sway bars. It is sad that the handling of the car should be a compromise, but serious owners may want to consider some of the pieces from the optional off-road F-41 suspension package to keep the tires firmly planted to the tarmac at all four corners.

What—no mention of horsepower? Funny you should ask. The engine identification plates mounted on the shifter consoles listed only the displacement, compression ratio and torque ratings of the mills. Obviously, Chevrolet would rather not discuss horsepower, because it is not even mentioned in the owner's manual. We'll let you in on the secret—the LS-4 is

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## VETTE TEST

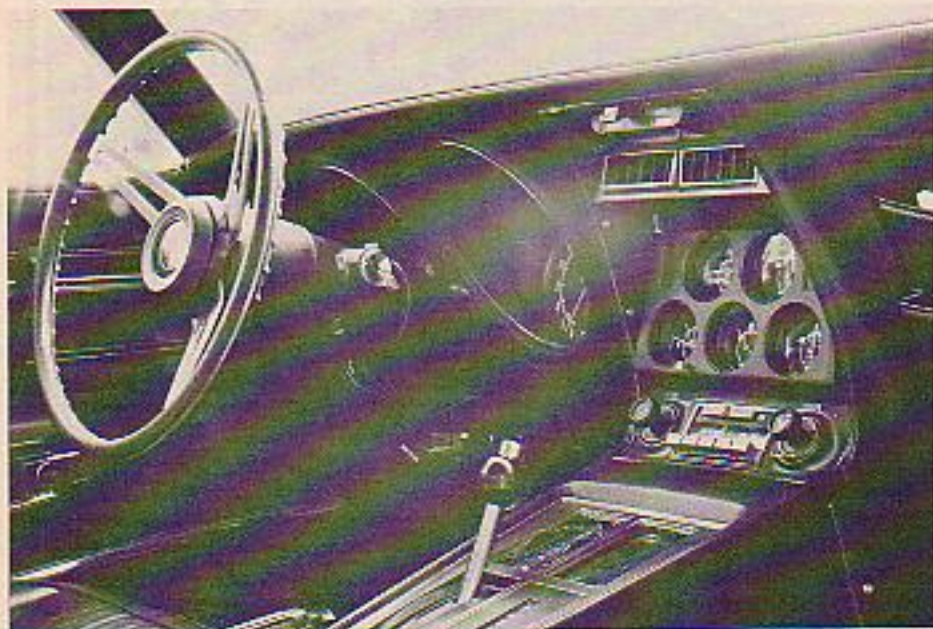
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good for 275 hp at four grand, and a believable 395 ft/lb of torque. The L-82, meanwhile, pumps out 280 ft/lb of torque at a lesser 245 hp rating, hence the similar performance. The cars were both equipped with Turbo Hydro transmissions, accounting for the consistent

performances and much of the pleasure of driving the cars. Sometimes you just get tired of pushing clutch pedals every few feet in freeway traffic. A spin-off from the emissions regulations allows the torque converter to be a bit on the loose side to ease passing the smog test, and the higher stall makes up for some of the normal low end sluggishness of the smog motors.

The '73 Vette rides remarkably better than any of its predecessors, a trait no doubt traceable to the radial tires that are now standard equipment. But the elegance has not been without its price. The car handles adequately, but there is no longer the feeling that you could turn the tires right off the rim before the car would waver from its track. On the highway, however, it would be hard to find any car that could compete with the Corvette in terms of comfort or ease of control at 70 or 80 mph. Freeway cruising is where the car feels most at home, and despite the shockingly low 20 psi recommended tire pressure, the car exudes total confidence on wide, constant radius turns. But the only time the worry of a little unexpected oversteer left us was when the 8-inch-wide Keystone Rogues and Firestone F60-15's were installed. The improvement to the car's appearance should be self evident from the pictures that accompany this test.

Given enough time, the engineers in Detroit will solve all of the problems that could come up in an American car, and the Vette seat belts are an excellent example of such an advance. Finally, somebody has devised a seat belt system that is too uncomfortable to buckle behind you, so the driver is forced to wear the belt to appease the raucous warning buzzer. (continued on page 135)



The Vette gut remains unchanged from '68 models, comfortable but a mite sparse.



## VETTE TEST

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The Corvette's four-wheel disc brakes are the single best feature of the car. There is absolutely no way to make them fade, and they are always capable of stopping you even faster than you want to be stopped. We are even willing to overlook their omnipresent squeaks and squeals in return for their excellence.

When *CAR CRAFT* tested the '70 454/425hp Vette, it was billed as the "last of the fast Corvettes." Nobody knew how true that was at the time. For seven thou you can still end up with a car that the punk down the street with his jacked-up '55 Chev can outrun in the straightaway. But Corvettes are much more than straight-line performers, and the pollution control effects just make you appreciate the other traits that much more.

The Thunderbird name tag has been thrown around as a description of what a sports car can degenerate to, but the Corvette is not quite that far down the road. Outside factors, including insurance costs and emission laws, have changed the image of the Corvette from that of a hell-raising hot rod to a refined and civil piece of transportation in a short time. Unfortunately, the levels of

quality control and finish have not risen to balance that loss, and what we are left with is simply a Corvette—order it with what you can get; take it or leave it. As a luxury cruiser, the stereo radio, air conditioning and power accessories add up to a very tempting and desirable package. And it's still got the heart of a lion—a Chevrolet drivetrain so dependable and widespread that it's almost as if created by a higher power, destined to live on after all others have been redesigned, re-engineered and recast so many times that no one cares to remember.

If the Corvette mystique has ever infected you, there will probably come a time in your life when you can no longer do without your own copy of America's only sports car. The car will always give you the strangest sensation of going just exactly where you point it, as if your hands and the front wheels are connected by an inflexible link, like the way a go-kart steers. The dream or recurring fantasy has not changed, and just the word "Corvette" implies magic that can not be disemboweled from the car. But the price to pay for the fulfillment of those dreams is becoming prohibitively high and the value of your fantasies is getting increasingly questionable. Still, there's only one way to tell for sure, and nobody but you knows how hard the Corvette fever has infected your life style. 