

Dreaming of the Motorama

Tell your neighbor that you bought the '54 because the exhaust note reminds you of your vintage Chris-Craft

by Colin Comer

Forget space and pace, just go with grace

Q I recently purchased a beautiful '54 Pennant Blue Vette with the Blue Flame Six. It is a great car but has a distinct lack of power. Between the six in a row that doesn't go and the lethargic Powerglide 2-speed automatic, I fear stoplight challenges from hybrid cars with dead batteries. To add insult to injury, my neighbor recently bought a Pennant Blue '55 Vette with the 170-hp V8. I think I saw him driving out of his garage in reverse gear faster than my car will go in either of its two forward speeds. What are my options to wake up this '54? Are they all like this or is mine just sick? Please help; even the kid down the street claims he can beat me on his skateboard.—**RSK, Bridgemanpton, New York.**

A No, you likely do not have a particularly sick '54. To use a line they taught me in dealership mechanic school, "They all do that." The '53-'54 'Vettes are beautiful cars that just look a lot more sporty than their powertrain allows them to be. Even when tuned to perfection, a Blue Flame Six might produce around 110 hp in real world numbers. By the time that power goes through the torque converter and the cast-iron Powerglide, not much grunt is reaching the rear wheels. A reasonably common modification years ago was to install a manual transmission, which will really transform the car. However, given the value of the car and the expense of this conversion, it is not something I recommend. A period supercharger would help somewhat but would require many modifications and I haven't



1954 'Vette, slow and stylish

seen one for sale in years. Time tested hot-rodding tricks like a better camshaft and engine work would help, but this is also a lot of money for a limited return. My best advice is to enjoy the car for what it is—a great looking remnant of the GM Motorama days that makes up in style what it lacks in absolute performance. That, or hide from the skater kid and tell your neighbor that you picked the '54 because the exhaust note reminds you of your vintage Chris-Craft boat with the Hercules Six.

Make sure you fit in a midyear

Q I am a "newbie" to the hobby but know my first collector car purchase has to be a midyear Corvette. I have been smitten with the design since I first saw one in 1963. What kind of tips can you give somebody looking to buy their first collectible Corvette?—**MLG, Barrington Hills, Illinois.**

A Good choice. I love midyear (1963-1967) 'Vettes, especially the coupes. As with any car, don't look for a bargain; find a trusted Corvette expert and have

him help you find a really good car. There is a lot of junk out there, and many 'Vettes are not what they appear to be. Join your local NCRS chapter and check out the NCRS newsletter for cars for sale. Go to a few club meetings and let them know you are interested in finding a great car. Don't be afraid to pay a premium for the right car in the right color; it is always money well spent buying the right car rather than an "almost." Also, take your intended use into consideration. As funny as it sounds, make sure you fit in a midyear. If you are tall, don't consider a '63 or '64 until you have driven one; the steering column is rather low and non-adjustable. In '65, GM changed the ergonomics slightly and the '65-'67 cars have more legroom. A host of other improvements came on line in 1965, including disc brakes. If you don't have to have a '67, look at other years, as '67s always command a premium. If you intend to drive the car much, consider a small-block car over a big block. Air conditioning is a great option for warmer climates and was available from the factory. Ask around, see what others recommend, read as many

reference books as you can, take the time and drive a few cars before you decide you really want one. Sometimes the reality doesn't live up to the dream. However, I think you will find if you buy a really good car, it will.

Give no quarter checking knockoffs

Q I own a 1966 convertible with knockoff wheels. At a local show a Corvette "expert" told me my wheels were not original but were in fact reproductions. How do I tell the difference?—**DWM, Scottsdale, Arizona**

A This has been a problem for many people. Original Kelsey-Hayes knockoff wheels are extremely valuable and the reproductions have become so good it is hard to tell if you don't know what to look for. Unfortunately, many people have paid a premium for a car with "original" wheels only to discover later that they have repros. Here are a few simple tests that will flush out most of the repros without much trouble: Look at the finish on the outside edges of the "vaness" of the wheel (not between the vanes). Original wheels have a dull finish, while the reproductions have a shiny, glittery finish that almost appears metallic. Also, look at the thickness of the vanes; original wheels have a very thin spoke while the repros have a noticeably thicker one. If in doubt, go to the last (and foolproof) test—the "quarter test." Take a quarter and try to insert it between the vanes of the wheel. It won't fit on a reproduction wheel with the thick vanes, but a quarter will fit between the thin vanes of an original wheel. I can hear change jingling and garage doors opening right now. ■

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