

Chevy's Corvette Has Turned Heads For A Half-Century

By Rick Popely and Jim Mateja
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In an industry known for changing its mind, the Chevrolet Corvette has steered the same course as the nation's sports car for 50 years, making it one of the world's most recognizable automobiles.

Whether the original 1953 roadster, a 1963 Sting Ray split-window coupe, or a 1993 ZR-1, most people instantly know it's a Corvette.

Only a handful of other model names have survived longer, among them the Chevrolet Suburban, which dates to 1935, and the Cadillac DeVille, which arrived in 1949.

Scores of other cars have disappeared or morphed into something else, while Corvette has stayed true to its roots as a two-seat, rear-wheel-drive sports car.

Corvette has cruised through two fuel crises, survived attacks by safety advocates and the insurance industry, and outlasted a procession of domestic and foreign rivals.

Ford followed Corvette with the 1955 Thunderbird, which soon took a different route. Within three years the Thunderbird grew from two seats to four to broaden its appeal, later grew to four doors, and eventually lost every link to the original except the name.

Ford resurrected the Thunderbird roadster in 2001 as a luxury cruiser, but sales failed to meet expectations, and the car is destined for a second retirement in a few years.

Corvette, meanwhile, rolls along as an automotive icon. Chevrolet built the one millionth Corvette in 1993, and will roll out the sixth generation in January at the Detroit Auto show. "There are three things that keep Corvette alive after 50 years," said Dave Hill, chief engineer of the Corvette since 1992. "One is value. Corvette still has outstanding value for what you get. The others are its tremendous performance and a passionate design that is timeless. It doesn't wear out quickly."

Since its inception, it has been a blue-collar Ferrari, priced well above run-of-the-mill Chevrolets yet within reach of the modestly affluent and alluring enough to appeal to the very rich.

"We have owners who have worked a lifetime to be able to afford a Corvette, and we have those who can afford to buy anything they want," Hill said.

Base price on the 2003 coupe is around \$44,000, and the “extreme performance” Z06 is \$52,000, versus \$81,000 for the Dodge Viper, its main domestic rival. Hill said Chevrolet had no plans to move into Viper price territory with the next generation, due next year as a 200 model.

“When we introduced the Z06 in 2001, we forecast it would be about 15 percent of sales, but it has turned out to be 25 percent,” Hill said. “People who want the best are willing to pay more, but we’re not going to get giddy and really move the price up because of that.”

One concern is volume. Jacking up the price would put the car out of reach of more buyers and make it harder to justify Corvette, which has sold 30,000 to 34,000 units in each of the last four years.

Another reason for the price ceiling on Corvette is that the sixth generation — internally designated C6 — will share major engineering features with the Cadillac XLR, a \$76,000 two-seat roadster that arrives in summer. Maintaining a significant price gap makes it less likely one will steal sales from the other — what the industry calls “cannibalizing.”

The 2005 Corvette will share its basic design with the XLR to reduce cost and generate higher volume from the same platform. That idea was kicked around as a cost-saving measure some 20 years ago, when John DeLorean was in charge of Chevrolet.

GM unveiled the Corvette at its 1953 Motorama; a traveling display of “dream cars” and technology, and the racy-looking roadster with a toothy grille and fiberglass body received rave reviews.

Chevrolet hurried the original into production that year, but Dave McClellan, Corvette's chief engineer from 1975 until he retired in 1992, said early quality gaffes nearly killed the car, which debuted with a \$3,498 base price.

“The '53-'54 original Vette's came to market with great euphoria, but the car basically bombed because of quality,” McClellan said. “It was rushed to market to come out a year earlier than planned. But the consequence was serious problems with such things as body and panel fits and painting the plastic body.”

The early models also survived despite a modest 6-cylinder engine (Chevy did not offer a V-8 at the time), when any number of alternatives were available with a V-8. Chevrolet's famed small-block V-8 became available in 1955, and all Corvettes have come with V-8s since 1956.

Chevrolet has said little about the 2005 Corvette, but spy photographs of test models indicate that the styling will be evolutionary; rumors persist that it will have more power.

"We're doing our best to keep the suspense until we unveil the car," Hill said of the C6. It won't be retro or a "heritage" model like the Thunderbird or 2005 Ford Mustang. "People are getting a little carried away with retro. We could easily have done that with Corvette," he said. "We respect our heritage, but we're always looking for the next breakthrough, always looking to the next Corvette, not to the past."