

MEMO

FROM: David E. Davis, Jr.

TO: Steve Smith

SUBJECT:

FITCH PHOENIX



PHOTOGRAPHY: MICHAEL SOLDEN

So, Semantic Man, I've caught you at last! You were wrong about the Fitch Phoenix. It is *not* a dumb car, not by any standard of measurement. It's a helluva nice car, in fact, and I think old John Fitch is going to sell a bunch of them. He and I drove it all over those keen little roads around Lime Rock, and I had a blast. I don't know if Fitch had as much fun as I did, but at least he didn't try to bail out or anything—not even when I busted the clutch cable about twenty miles out in the deepest boondocks and had to nurse the little dear all the way home clutchlessly, if not altogether graunchlessly.

All that jazz you were trying to lay on me about “no Corvair is worth \$8700” is hogwash. This car is no more a Corvair than the Porsche Speedster was a Volkswagen. It uses the basic Corvair engine and drive train, and a lot of other bits, I suppose, but it's an entirely different sort of a car. And it's worth the money.

It's something else, Mate. It handles like a cross between a late-model Porsche and the best Corvair you ever drove in your life. The bodywork is wild. It doesn't look like anything you're used to, but you know instantly that it's SOMETHING! Rich! Virile! Republican!

FITCH PHOENIX

MEMO CONTINUED

The whole concept is different from anything else I can think of at the moment. Maybe he should call it the Fitch Phenomenon, har, har. Sorry.

It's something else, Mate. It handles like a cross between a late-model Porsche and the best Corvair you ever drove in your life. It has the same wheelbase as the stock Corvair, but it's so much smaller overall, and so much lighter, that it's a lot quicker and more responsive than its Corvair ancestry might lead you to expect. It steers and stops and gets off the line with real authority. It's *tight*, you know what I mean? It's a genuine sports car—not a GT, and not a hoked-up “modern classic” either. Wait'll you drive it—it's a gas!

The notion for the Phoenix was born years ago. I remember an idea that John was trying to sell to somebody in Detroit in 1958 or '59. He wanted one of the manufacturers to build low-cost production sports cars using standard sedan components, and it was a good idea—as Carroll Shelby later proved. After the initial success of his Corvair Sprints, John figured that he might resurrect that other concept, using his basic Sprint engine and running gear.

He sat down with Coby Whitmore and they roughed out this crazy-looking sports machine with removable fenders and stuff like that—they were thinking about a low-cost racing car, *à la* Formula Vee, that could be used on the street. But before they ever got that one swinging, Formula Vee came along and beat them to the punch. With the racing side of the thing thus killed off, it was back to the old drawing board.

Fortunately they managed to steer clear of the “campy” concept that led to cars like the Excalibur SS and the Mercer Cobra. They wanted it to look like a Fitch Phoenix, and nothing else. Whitmore says that they had no intention of trying to come up with an “ultimate GT car,” and Fitch says, “It was planned only as a two-seater car of better-than-average performance, but with unique identity and character.” And that's what it is. They've managed to retain virtually all the things we traditionally expect from a sports car, added a lot of very up-to-date luxury stuff, and wrapped the whole thing in a shape that's quite different without looking weird.

I went over to see the car at Abercrombie & Fitch (no relation) when they first announced that they were going to be selling it. It didn't look exactly smashing, wedged in among all the badminton sets and barometers on their first floor, but I couldn't help being impressed by the great mob of Madison Avenue types and tweedy dowagers that was standing around ooh-ing and aah-ing about it. I figured that he could sell a lot of them then, and now that I've spent some time driving the car, I'm convinced.

Fact: The Phoenix is 174 inches long, 45 inches high, 70 inches wide, and it weighs 1950 pounds.

Fact: The Phoenix has a Corvair engine which produces 170 horsepower with the help of Weber carburetors, plus the usual Fitch Sprint engine treatment. It will cruise comfortably at well over 100 mph, and will accelerate 0-60 in about 7.5 seconds. It features





If you try to fit it in any of the usual categories, you're going to be in trouble, because it's DIFFERENT! It costs as much as a Mercedes 220 SE Coupe, with performance like a Pontiac GTO, but it just can't be compared with either one.



FITCH PHOENIX

MEMO CONTINUED



Girling disc brakes at the front, and stock 9.5-in. Corvair drums at the rear.

Fact: There is also a Phoenix II, which will have stock Corvair carburetion and stock Corvair drum brakes all round. It will have 160 hp, as in the Fitch Sprint, and it will sell for \$8300.

Fact: The Phoenix is built by Frank Reisner's increasingly well-known Intermeccanica organization in Italy. The body-chassis unit is all steel, and the wing-like shroud behind the cockpit is a functional roll bar. The chassis of the prototype is a modified and much-stiffened Corvair platform, but production Phoenixes will feature a Fitch-conceived, Reisner-engineered chassis all their own. All suspension is stock Corvair, except for a set of Koni adjustable shock absorbers.

Fact: The driver's seat of each Phoenix will be positioned according to the dimensions and preference of its primary driver. Both seats are vinyl-upholstered with woven inserts which direct a flow of fresh air to the occupants' backs and posteriors in hot weather (cold weather too, if you're a masochist or an Eskimo).

Fact: Due to the fact that the rear tires are one size larger than the fronts (185-14 compared to 175-14), the car carries two spares, one in each size. That's part of the reason behind the two side-mount humps in the front fenders, but Fitch and Whitmore make no bones

(Continued on page 118)



FITCH PHOENIX

(continued from page 60)

about the fact that the humps were more a styling innovation than a functional requirement.

Enough facts! *It's subjective time again!* All that information is probably keen stuff, but it doesn't tell us much about driving the car, right?

The Phoenix I drove was a dark sort of tobacco brown color, and it looked very mean and sleek. I'm not keen about the wood-and-aluminum luggage rack they've stuck on the engine compartment lid, but realities must be faced, and the car is short on inside storage space. The bodywork is wild. It doesn't look like anything you're used to, but you know instantly that it's *something!*

One's first look at the interior is very impressive. Everything is padded and upholstered in matte-black vinyl—the cowl, the instrument panel, the tunnel, everything. This tasteful use of padding, coupled with the Italian-faced instruments and switches, gives one a definite feeling of Ferrari-class quality. Rich! Virile! Republican!

I got settled in the driver's seat and fiddled with the controls for a moment—flicking the switch that lowers the rear window in the process. A moment later when I twisted the key to start the beastie, we got a blast of noise through the open window fit to bust an eardrum. John quickly hit the button and got the window up again, and something approximating a normal level of conversation was possible once more. It's a little noisy, you might say. Not Hollywood-muffler-get-arrested noisy, but sit-in-the-cockpit - and - feel - the - wax - deposits-build-up-in-your-ears noisy.

There's nothing mysterious about driving the Phoenix. Just drive it like a Corvair where the controls are concerned, and like a Porsche where the limit of adhesion and cornering power are concerned. For the time being, all Phoenixes are coming through with stock Corvair ratios in their four-speed boxes, and their wide spacing hurts performance a little, but not badly.

John Fitch points you off down a little-bitty asphalt road, and you change down to third and stick your boot in it. Flat in third, shift to fourth at 5500, around the first curve flat in fourth. Some sand gets you loose for a millisecond, but the Goodyear radials bite again and, OH BOY, here we go! One little bend right after another. Even though they're fairly tight and moderately blind you feel like a dummy every

time you hit the brakes and shift down. What the car wants you to do is keep your big foot hard down in fourth and just scrub off any excess speed with a little twitch of the wheel and a few feet of slide. Oh boy, glorious. Oh boy, fun.

You come off a downhill right at about 85 and John says "there's a big bump down at the bottom of this hill," so you lift your foot. "No, no," he yells, "stay on it!" So you get on the throttle again, and leap over this grandmother of all bumps at about 65. "Too bad," Fitch says, "you weren't going fast enough." All the car did at that speed was fly through the air a little way, then land on all four wheels with a comfortable thump. Straight as a die. Crazy!

Driven this way, the Phoenix is absolutely above reproach. It does all the right things. The brakes are first class and the acceleration and handling are right up there with the best European GT cars. Its steer characteristic, under these somewhat unscientific conditions, was neutral throughout most of the performance range, but oversteer could be induced by twitching the wheel and stabbing at either brake or throttle. The Phoenix is all right.

So that's the Phoenix, sports fans. If you try to make it fit in any of the usual automotive categories you're going to run into trouble, because it's *different*. It costs as much as a Mercedes 220SE coupe, with performance much like a Pontiac GTO, but it just can't be compared with either one. The Phoenix has a lot of traditional sports car trappings, but it sure as hell isn't an Alfa 1750 replica or an Excalibur SS either. It enjoys the benefits of American production line parts but it's much more European than American in its execution.

Between Abercrombie & Fitch and a handful of enthusiastic Chevy dealers, John Fitch figures he can easily sell all of the first batch of 500 cars that will soon be coming across the sea from Frank Reisner at Intermeccanica. I'm inclined to agree with him. This car isn't for the old dyed-in-the-wool purists who expect it to conform to some rigid set of automotive rules.

The Phoenix is *different*. And the men who lay down their \$8700 for them will be different too. It's a good thing. It's high time we got some new blood in this movement. Cars and people. *Smith, if you change one word of this, I'll kill you.*—David E. Davis, Jr.