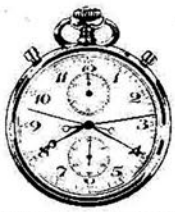


CAR and DRIVER ROAD TEST

Corvette 427 Coupe

Beautifully styled, lusty, exciting—Chevy's Corvette coupe is the automobile world's Barbarella.

PHOTOGRAPHY: JULIAN NEVILLE

Chevrolet's Corvette ranks just one notch below immortality on America's list of mechanical achievements—and well it should. Like barbed wire and the cotton gin, it borrows from no one. Every working aspect and every styling feature evolve from Chevrolet's plan to build the ultimate American car. The Corvette is exciting, it's lusty, it stimulates all of the base emotion lurking deep in modern man. It is the Barbarella of the car maker's art.

Corvette owners begin with very young men who can barely afford the front money, care nothing about sports cars, and invariably lose their driving licenses for over-indulging. But Corvette owners also include middle-aged doctors and lawyers who view their cars as surrogate mistresses. Despite their differences, a certain rapport exists between all Corvette owners and one procedure is common to all—they never make reference to their *cars* but always to their *Corvettes*. Cruelly high insurance rates, proliferating families, astonishing increases in girth and guilt might conspire to deprive a man of his Corvette—but at heart he never loses it; in his secret dreams he is always a Corvette owner, and he cannot forget that once upon a time . . .

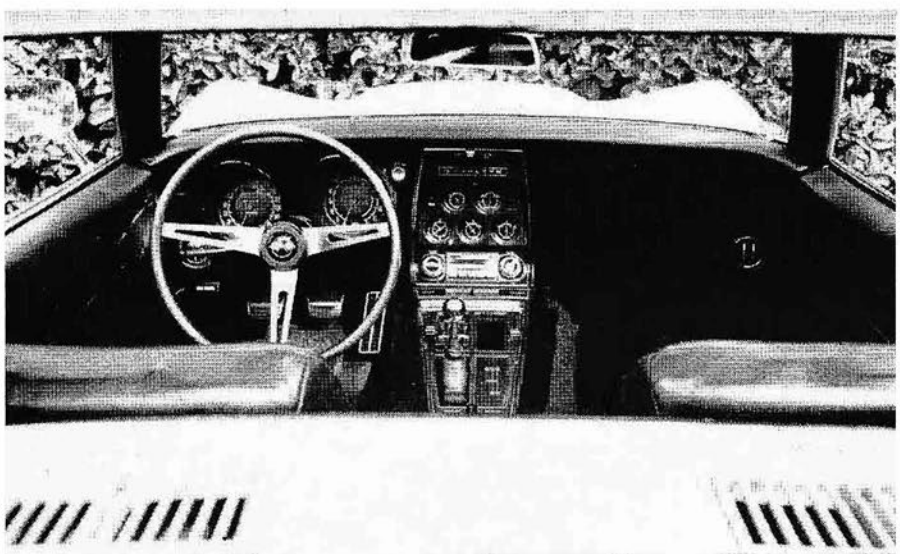
Subtlety has never been a characteristic of Barbarellas and it's not to be found in the all-new styling of the '68 Corvette. It's a brutal, masculine looking machine with a shape that suggests a slightly overweight Group 7 sports racer or one of the Le Mans Ferraris when they were *winning*. The shape doesn't whisper, it bellows power, and with the 400-horsepower 427 cu. in. engine, with which our test car was equipped, Barbarella's siren song is distinctly throaty.

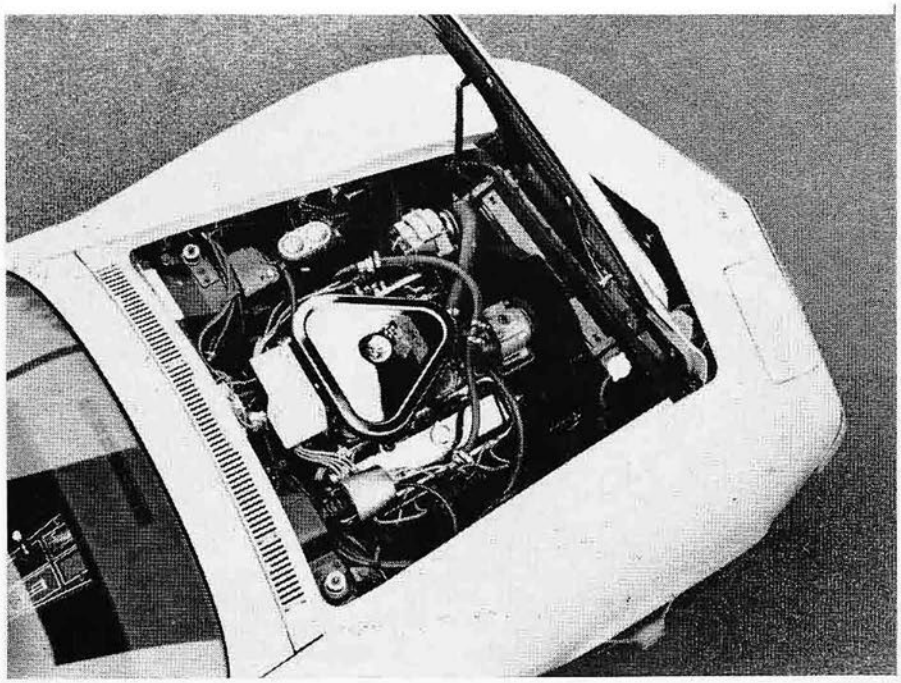
The '68 Corvette is a 2-door rocket sled.

(continued)

The Corvette Sting Ray is a brilliant car, with all of the virtues and all of the vices of American technology. On balance, it's an almost irresistible temptation to buy American.

Its 400 hp engine is no different than the one offered last year except for the mandatory air pump apparatus for emission control. Three 2-bbl. Holley carburetors are used, with the one in the middle providing for normal operation while the end ones, with their vacuum operated throttles, are useful for setting land speed records and snaffling traffic tickets. If you're disposed to chug around in traffic the system is great. The center carburetor lets the engine idle at 750 rpm and then pull away smoothly in any gear with no fuss. The operation of the secondaries is nowhere near so predictable. Whenever they get ready, and they get ready on a predetermined system governed by air flow through the primary carburetor, the end carburetors snap open with a great sucking roar and the Corvette charges forth in a fashion that would put the efforts of a Crimean Lancer in a class with a dilletantish Sunday rider in Central Park. Yes, there normally is a short lag before the vacuum-operated secondaries open themselves, but the system was never objectionable until we started doing timed acceleration runs. When the engine was warm the car would take a giant cough immediately after a 5600 rpm 1-2 shift. After cooling off for a couple hours the problem was gone—do you have a couple of hours to wait? This is exactly the same problem we discovered on the first '68 Corvette we drove last fall and is frustrating in a car that otherwise produces so much power in an almost effortless fashion. On the stumble-free runs the Corvette roared through the quarter in 14.1 seconds at 102 mph—quick but nowhere as quick as it sounded or felt. The test car had a 3.70 axle which Chevrolet calls a Special Purpose Ratio, which means street racing. With the standard 3.36 ratio the Corvette would still be in third gear at the end of the quarter, and that's no way to deal with the demands of Woodward Avenue. How fast would our test Corvette go? Who knows. With the 3.70 axle, top speed runs and wounded engines may very well come in matched pairs because when we hit an indicated 125 mph the tach needle had already used up half the red zone and was obviously headed back for zero the hard way. Experience said quit while the quitting was good. LSD makes a great trip, but our choice is a few seconds of wide open throttle in a 427 Corvette.





The Owner's Manual warns that normal operating temperature is 210°F and that's exactly where the temperature gauge stabilized on our test car. Apparently the combination of reduced grille opening and the air pump for exhaust emission control has produced cooling problems. The fan is the noisiest one we can remember, which indicates GM is trying to solve the problem by pushing more air through the radiator. Actually, there are certain advantages to high coolant temperatures (improved thermal efficiency and reduced crankcase dilution), provided overheating can be avoided on extremely hot days. The only disadvantage we found to the high operating temperature was that the passenger compartment tended to be warmer than normal. Not too surprising when you consider that 700 pounds of 210°F cast iron is separated from the driver's feet by only a thin piece of fiberglass.

Very few changes have been made in the drivetrain and chassis from previous years but that's only a fault if they're inade-

Buzzers, blinking lights, hidden windshield wipers—it's all there, but the undisputed champion of Corvette's trick-stuff parade has to be the take-apart roof.

quate. They're not. The transmission, as always, is perfect—with a well-balanced, sturdy-feeling linkage that builds all kinds of confidence. Clutch effort is light considering the torque it must cope with. All of this is to say that shifting is easy and pleasant, but the close ratio transmission and the 460 lbs./ft. of torque make it seldom necessary. Even so, we found ourselves shifting whenever the slightest occasion arose just because we couldn't keep our hands off the Barbarella.

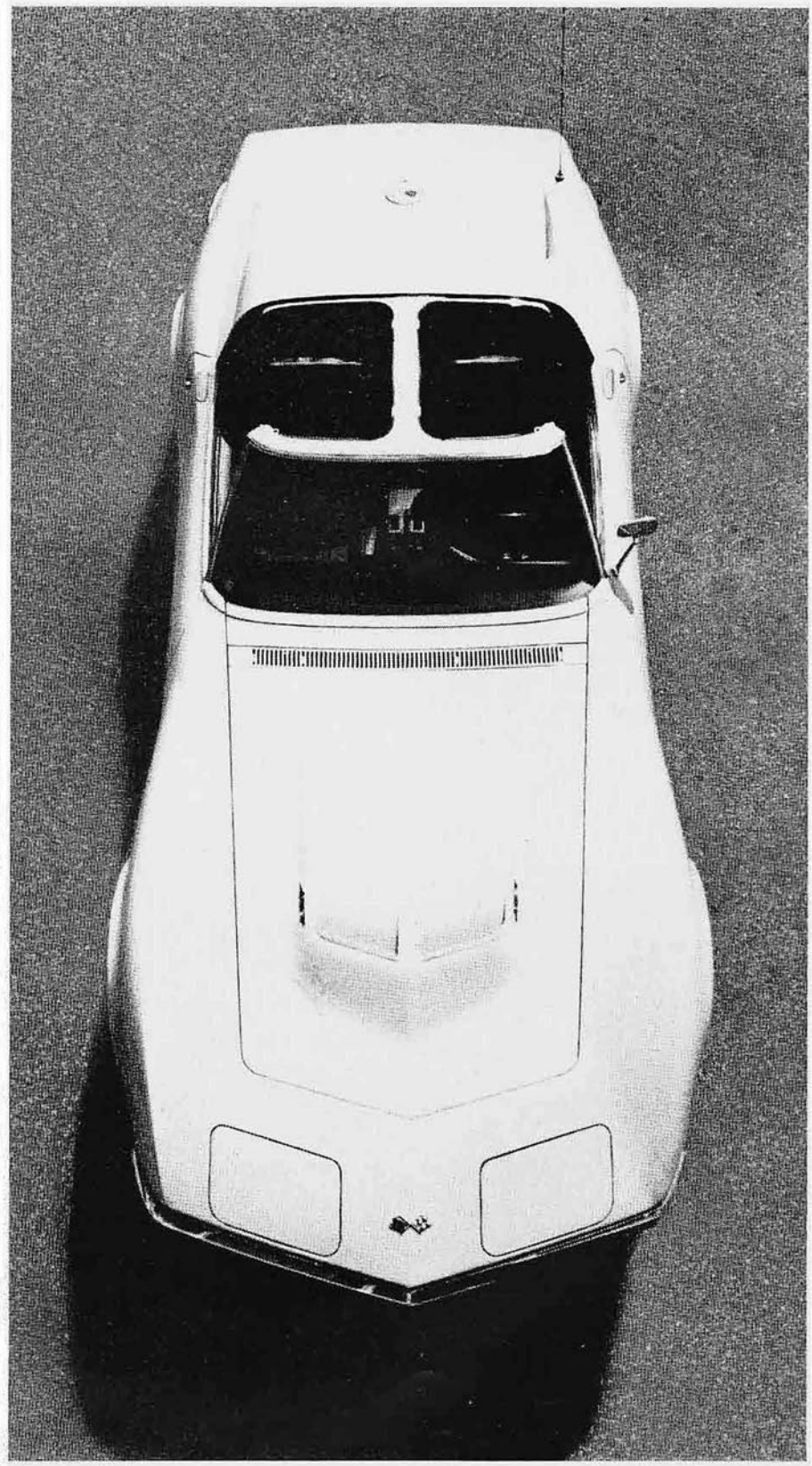
On the other hand, we learned to use extreme caution when making vigorous shifts into fourth gear because the designers have built in a hazard in the form of a forward-facing console-mounted emergency brake lever. The Corvette people never have been able to find a satisfactory place for their hand brake lever. Before '67 it was mounted under the dash and when set, never failed to bash the entering driver's knee. Now they've mounted it between the seats and pointed it right at the shift knob.

So you make a rapid 3-4 shift, the kind Corvettes encourage, and the brake lever carves a neat little notch out of the driver's right hand.

There are certain drivetrain noises that come as standard equipment on Corvettes. Even though its appearance has changed completely, the noises are the same ones we've been hearing since the first independent rear suspension and the first 4-speed transmission. There is a muted clunk in the rear end that speaks occasionally when the slack is taken up in the drivetrain, and the transmission makes a soft whirring sound in the lower gears. Every Corvette owner who ever was knows what we're talking about and wisely accepts it as an inherent part of the mechanism. A mistress isn't supposed to be *perfect*.

The Corvette's ride quality has never been what we would call supple but it's even stiffer now. Suspension changes have been aimed at better handling and increased understeer but some of the changes—increased front suspension rates and wheels widened to seven inches—have the side effect of a harsher ride. In the effort to increase understeer, the rear roll center was also lowered. Why more understeer? Older Sting Rays (Chevrolet started this year calling its car simply "Corvette," then decided Sting Ray was too good to give up, so changed the name back) were very good handling cars but surprisingly close to neutral steer. If the driver

(Text continued on page 124; Specifications overleaf)



CHEVROLET CORVETTE

Manufacturer: Chevrolet Motor Division
General Motors Corporation
30003 Van Dyke
Warren, Michigan 48090

Number of dealers in U.S.: 6400

Vehicle type: Front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 2-passenger coupe

Price as tested: $5787.80
(Manufacturer's suggested retail price, including all options listed below, Federal excise tax, dealer preparation and delivery charges; does not include state and local taxes, license or freight charges)

Options on test car:
4-speed transmission ($184.35), 400 hp engine ($305.50), power brakes ($42.15), AM/FM radio ($172.75), power windows ($57.95), wheel covers ($57.95), tinted glass ($15.80), telescopic steering column ($42.15), transistor ignition ($73.75), red stripe tires ($31.30), power steering ($94.80), limited slip differential ($46.35)

ENGINE
Type: water-cooled V-8, cast iron block and heads, 5 main bearings
Bore x stroke.....4.25 x 3.76 in, 108 x 95.5 mm
Displacement.....427 cu in, 7000 cc
Compression ratio.....10.25 to one
Carburetion.....3 x 2-bbl. Holley
Valve gear.pushrod operated overhead valves, hydraulic lifters
Power (SAE).....400 bhp @ 5400 rpm
Torque (SAE).....460 lbs/ft @ 3600 rpm
Specific power output.....0.94 bhp/cu in, 56.2 bhp/liter
Max. recommended engine speed...5600 rpm

DRIVE TRAIN
Transmission.....4-speed, all-synchro
Clutch diameter.....11.0 in
Final drive ratio.....3.70 to one

Gear	Ratio	Mph/1000 rpm	Max. test speed
I	2.20	9.5	53 mph (5600 rpm)
II	1.64	12.8	71 mph (5600 rpm)
III	1.27	16.5	92 mph (5600 rpm)
IV	1.00	21.2	119 mph (5600 rpm)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES
Wheelbase.....98.0 in
Track.....F: 58.3 in, R: 59.0 in
Length.....182.1 in
Width.....69.2 in
Height.....47.8 in
Ground clearance.....4.9 in
Curb weight.....3440 lbs
Test weight.....3590 lbs
Weight distribution, F/R.....51.5/48.5%
Lbs/bhp (test weight).....9.0
Battery capacity.....12 volts, 62 amp/hr
Alternator capacity.....444 watts
Fuel capacity.....20 gal
Oil capacity.....5 qts
Water capacity.....21 qts

SUSPENSION
F: Ind., unequal-length wishbones, coil springs, anti-sway bar
R: Ind., single trailing arms, fixed length halfshafts and lateral links, multi-leaf transverse spring

STEERING
Type.....Recirculating ball gear with linkage booster
Turns lock-to-lock.....3.25
Turning circle.....35 ft

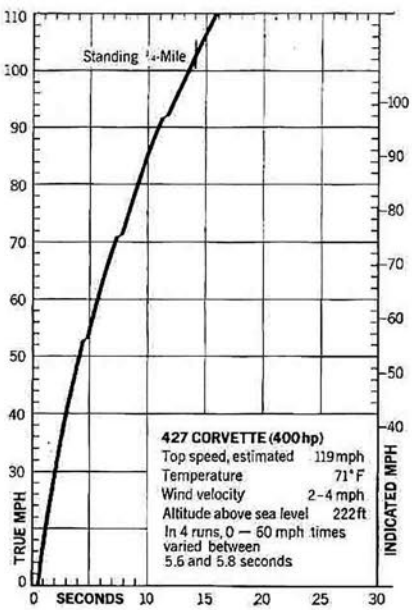
BRAKES
F:.....11.75-in vented disc
R: 11.75-in vented disc with 6.5 x 1.25-in internal drum for parking brake
Swept area.....461.2 sq in

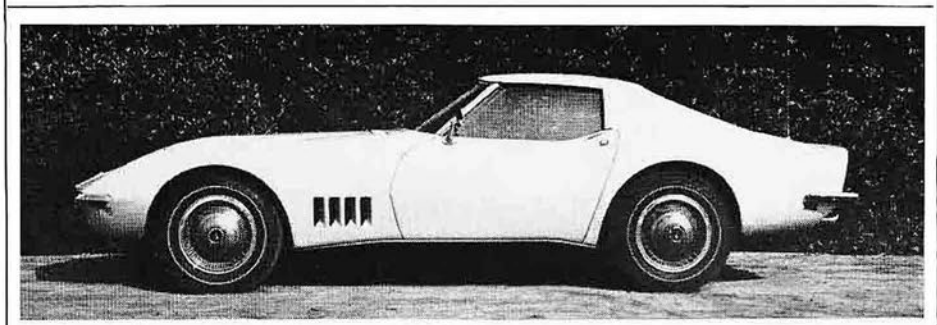
WHEELS AND TIRES
Wheel size and type.....15 x 7-in, stamped steel, 5-bolt
Tire make, size and type....Firestone F70 x 15 nylon tubeless
Test inflation pressures...F: 24 psi, R: 24 psi
Tire load rating.....1280 lbs per tire @ 24 psi

PERFORMANCE

Zero to	Seconds
30 mph	1.9
40 mph	2.8
50 mph	4.0
60 mph	5.7
70 mph	7.2
80 mph	9.2
90 mph	11.0
100 mph	13.7

Standing ¼-mile.....14.1 sec @ 102 mph
80–0 mph panic stop.....229 ft (.93 G)
Fuel mileage.....10–15 mpg on premium fuel
Cruising range.....200–300 mi





CHECK LIST

ENGINE
Starting.....Very Good
Response.....Very Good
Vibration.....Very Good
Noise.....Very Good

DRIVE TRAIN
Shift linkage.....Excellent
Synchro action.....Excellent
Clutch smoothness.....Very Good
Drive train noise.....Good

STEERING
Effort.....Good
Response.....Good
Road feel.....Good
Kickback.....Very Good

SUSPENSION
Ride comfort.....Good
Roll resistance.....Excellent
Brake dive.....Good
Harshness control.....Fair

HANDLING
Directional control.....Very Good
Predictability.....Very Good
Evasive maneuverability.....Very Good
Resistance to sidewinds.....Very Good

BRAKES
Pedal pressure.....Good
Response.....Very Good
Fade resistance.....Excellent
Directional stability.....Good

CONTROLS
Wheel position.....Very Good
Pedal position.....Very Good
Gearshift position.....Excellent
Relationship.....Very Good
Small controls.....Fair

INTERIOR
Ease of entry/exit.....Good
Noise level (cruising).....Very Good
Front seating comfort.....Excellent
Front leg room.....Very Good
Front head room.....Good
Front hip/shoulder room.....Fair
Instrument comprehensiveness...Very Good
Instrument legibility.....Good

VISION
Forward.....Very Good
Front quarter.....Very Good
Side.....Very Good
Rear quarter.....Poor
Rear.....Good

WEATHER PROTECTION
Heater/defroster.....Very Good
Ventilation.....Good
Weather sealing.....Good

CONSTRUCTION QUALITY
Fiberglass.....Fair
Paint.....Good
Chrome.....Very Good
Upholstery.....Good
Padding.....Very Good
Hardware.....Good

GENERAL
Parking and signal lights.....Very Good
Wiper effectiveness.....Excellent
Service accessibility.....Fair
Trunk space.....Fair
Interior storage space.....Fair
Bumper protection.....Fair

(Continued from page 49)

wasn't careful, even with one of the 327 engined Corvettes, and got carried away with the power on tap, he would find himself sideways in a corner before he knew what happened. If that was true of the small-engined Corvette, you can imagine what happened when you put the wood to the 427. As the giganto-engine option became more popular, Chevrolet saw the need to build in a bigger safety factor, hence, more understeer in the '68s. The change is obvious after you zap through a few corners. While the primitive Sting Rays were quite happy entering a turn fast and maintaining speed or slightly accelerating through, the '68 Corvette definitely wants to be powered through a turn, and if you don't it just pushes through, grinding off its front tires. We liked the old ones better although the new ones are very resistant to spin-outs if that happens to be your particular anticipatory horror. Although a different driving technique is required, the latest Corvette still seems to get through a corner faster than the previous models, thanks to its lower center of gravity, 1-inch wider wheels, and a 0.7 inch wider track.

Our test car came through with power steering which is not a bad option to have if you ever want to parallel park your fat-tired, 427-engined plastic Chevrolet. It's a very high-effort type of power steering and the only indication you have that help is coming from somewhere is that parking effort is the same as normal driving effort. True, it doesn't have the road feel of the manual gear but it's not bad either and if you're going to spend much time maneuvering in slow traffic with a 427 perched over the front wheels we'd recommend it.

If, about now, you're getting the idea we're lazy you'd better know the whole truth: our test Corvette had power brakes too. Unlike the power steering, the brakes are of the low-effort variety and require some getting used to. When it comes to stopping the car, however, they're the next best thing to an arresting hook. Any time you find a car that will stop from 80 mph in 229 feet (.93G) and then turn around and do it again and again, you've got something to be excited about. The overly sensitive power booster made it almost impossible to avoid lock-up, particularly when stopping from 80 mph. But even so, the Corvette would still stop within the confines of one lane. Four-wheel disc brakes are standard on the Corvette, the only American car to be so equipped, and they really work.

A Corvette and a front-mounted corn picker have something in common. You never know where the front end ends because the long, shark-like snout disappears beyond the horizon. Parking is only moderately dangerous, but all the while it's parked you live in fear of returning to find the Corvette's pointy nose blunted by the hind end of a deaf spinster's Crunchmobile.

While Chevrolet was re-fashioning the outside of the '68 Corvette, they totally rearranged the inside, too. The instrument panel is done-up in the aircraft tradition with all kinds of matter-of-fact looking instruments on a flat-black background and very little bright metal trim—which is the way to go. The speedometer and tachometer are huge and easily readable but why locate all of the small gauges low and in the center of the panel? That wasn't a very good idea on an MG-TC and it's no better on a Corvette.

Pre-Sting Ray Corvette collectors remember the sit-straight-up-steering-wheel-in-your-chest driving position. Well, Corvettes have come a long way since then and a giant step of that distance was taken with the design of the '68 model. The seats now recline in a super-comfortable space-age fashion with the steering wheel and pedals just where they should be. If your leg is thick from taking too many absolute stands on too many absolute positions, you'll want a little more clearance between the seat cushion and the bottom of the wheel—but that's the only shortcoming, and crusaders everywhere should be prepared to resign themselves to the attendant evils of their excesses anyway. The Corvette is an outstandingly comfortable car to drive, one of the best sports cars we can remember.

The lower roofline and pinched waist have resulted in a more intimate-feeling cockpit—some will call it small, with justice. The interior width dimension is definitely reduced. Sitting in a Stone Age Sting Ray was like sitting in a room compared to an E-type Jaguar but that feeling is gone now—the Corvette feels much more like the intimate 2-passenger sports car that it's intended to be. Intimacy is perfectly fine with us, but we'll choose the time and the place, and a '68 Corvette is neither. The one-piece molded inner door panels are particularly thick at the window sills, just where men are the widest.

In the restyling shuffle the passenger space clearly suffered, but that's not to say anyone was ignoring the luggage space either. It's terrible. If you travel much, particularly *à deux* you may as well resign yourself to a rear deck luggage rack because the cargo hold behind the seats is now good for one fat suitcase with some dirty linen stuffed around it. How such a big car can have so little baggage space should be the subject of a congressional investigation. Chevrolet isn't discriminating though, all those of you who, over the years, have grown to expect some sort of glove box in the dash will also be disappointed. The stylists did away with *that*, too, in the process of making the Corvette bigger. Instead there are two compartments, one with a locking lid, located in the floor of the luggage compartment behind the seats. At best, it's unhandy having to

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turn around and reach between the seats and you can't even see into the largest compartment which is on the far right side if you're sitting in the driver's seat—which you had better be doing if you're driving. Forget the whole operation if your trunk is full.

Corvette started the gimmick game in '63 with hidden headlights but that was nothing compared to the latest offering. The latest in hiding-biz is hidden windshield wipers. Never mind getting stuff—rain, snow, buzzard entrails—off the windshield. At least that's the way it seems. But search the interior and you'll find a wiper switch right in the middle of the instrument panel near the top. Flip the lever to the right and a hatch, the full width of the cowl, lifts with a clunk freeing two captive wiper arms to do their job. And a splendid job they do, too, wiping almost the whole windshield including parts of the glass that are even hidden from the drivers eye by safety padding on the A-pillar and on top of the instrument panel. Some of the Corvette's gimmicks don't come through so bravely. A lot of them just lie there and buzz. The whole interior has been booby-trapped with safety devices—the most unnerving of the assortment being the buzzer that goes off whenever the door is opened while the key is in the ignition. There's something very rude about that approach to gim-crackery in the name of safety. It's an unmannerly buzz. Almost as bad is the seat belt warning light that has to be manually shut off every time the engine is started whether or not the belts are fastened. Pass the hatchet. Some of the other devices, like the door ajar warning light and the fiber optic light monitor system, are of genuine worth; they give useful information without annoyance.

Of course the champion of Corvette's trick stuff parade has to be the take-apart roof. We've put off talking about it almost to the end because we can't decide whether to like it or not. If you buy a coupe, it doesn't cost anything extra and you don't have to take it apart if you don't want to so it can't be *too* bad. With the pieces all assembled there were no extra rattles, shakes, or water leaks—just like driving a closed car except for all the latches and cut lines in the headliner. Assuming you like the idea of an occasional patch of daylight on top of your head the only real problem is what to do with the pieces after the disassembly operation. Two latches hold each panel and, in typical Corvette fashion, panels come out with ease. They're meant to go into the trunk but if you've already got anything more than a bag of popcorn in there, forget it. A pair of giganto vinyl envelopes have been provided to protect the roof panels while they're being stored. The plan then is to strap the packaged panels to the side walls of the trunk compartment—actually they end up leaning on the wheel arches and take up a good bit of the available space. The back window clamps to a false roof that drops down from the top of the trunk compartment. Got that? Now all you have to do is snap the roof back up and that part is out of sight. Well, not really. The latch that holds the panel up is genuinely feeble and the result is that the whole business drops down whenever it feels a mind. Still, nobody says you have to take it apart and it didn't cost extra—but it would be nice if it *worked*. Driving the open-air coupe is pleasant enough—with the side windows up there is almost no draft, even at speed, but in the back of your mind you're thinking about putting everything back together when you get where you're going.

Just criticism—and a good deal of it—can be leveled at the Corvette's quality. The cheapest conceivable plastic knobs are used on the controls, unbound edges of carpet are visible around the seat tracks and at lap joints behind the seats, and the covering on the seats seldom fits smoothly. Corvette paint quality has always been poor—so thin in spots you can see the primer underneath. Yet this is the American automobile story. Luxury cars are assembled with the same materials and the same lack of care as compact sedans at half the price. Customers mumble about lack of quality but not loud enough so that the manufacturers really get worried. The Corvette is no better than a Camaro when it comes to quality and people buy them anyway. The result is an occasional car as bad as the Corvette we were given early last fall. (*C/D*, Dec.)—and absolutely refused to test. Execrable quality control is a special shame on a car so well conceived as the '68 Sting Ray. The contrast between good mechanicals and bad workmanship is devastating.

We've found things to criticize about the Corvette but over the years we've concluded the Sting Ray is better suited to the American scene than any other sports car in the world and at a price lower than you would have to pay for an E-type Jaguar, or a Porsche 911, or Toyota 2000 GT. The Corvette is not a copy of anything. It produces a whole new set of emotions in its beholders. It's American and no other description begins to capture it. It's big and why not? America has always demanded big cars—we've got plenty of space. Mechanically it feels unbreakable and it delivers a full measure of performance that its competitors can't match at double the price. Handling is impeccable, limited only by street tires, and the Corvette's pitch and float-free ride is ideally suited to high speed touring on American highways.

All of these automotive delectations are wrapped up in a package so boldly styled that no one can ignore its existence. The Corvette is a brilliant car with all of the virtues and all of the vices of American technology. On balance, it's an almost irresistible temptation to buy American. ●