

Your Icon of Icons:

The Chevrolet Corvette Is the Most Iconic Car of the Past 75 Years



“America’s sports car” was chosen by you from among 10 of the greatest cars in automotive history.

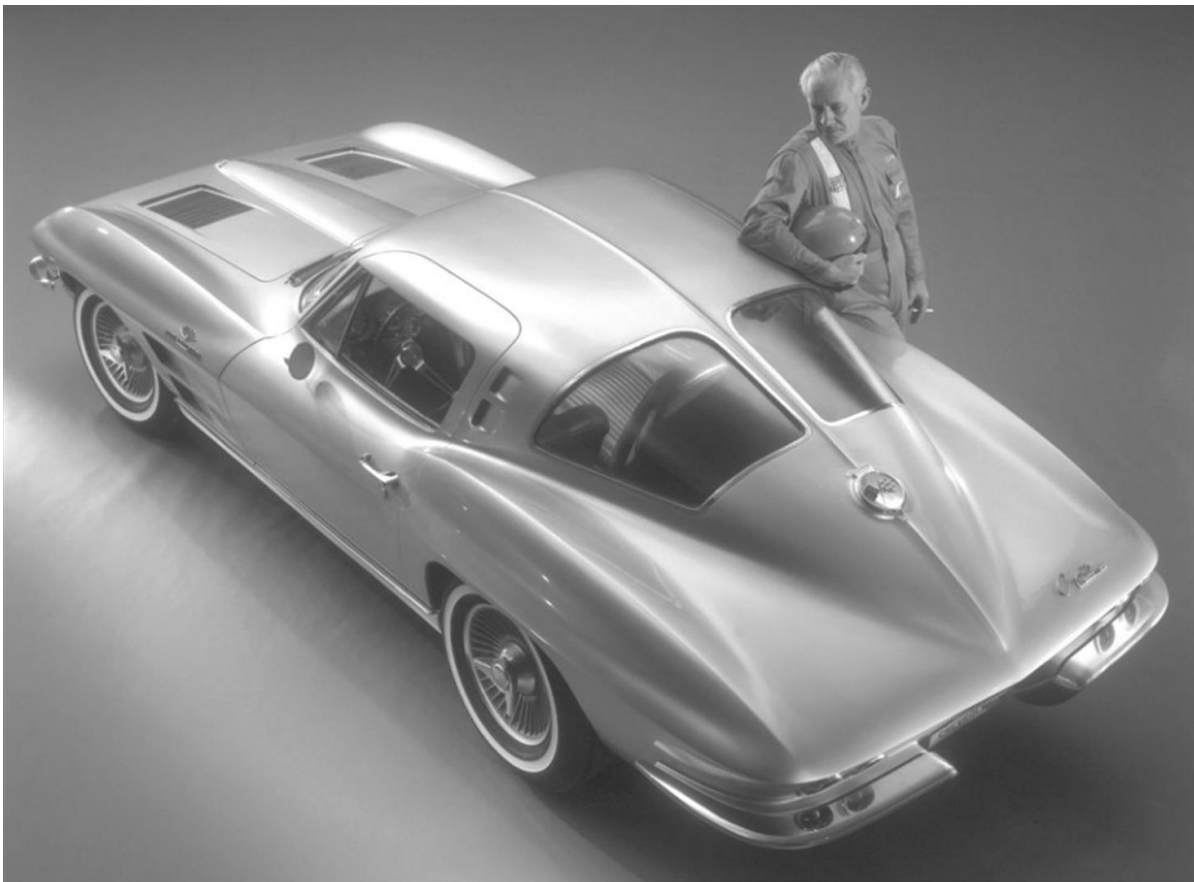
Scott Evans - Writer, Motor Trend Staff - Photographer, Mar 25, 2024

Was there ever any doubt? Motor Trend readers are largely American, and as much as we love Jeeps, Mustangs, and F-150s in this country, the Corvette has been “America’s sports car” for nearly as long as this publication has existed. That’s why you chose it via our online vote as the most iconic car of the past 75 years.

Rewind 71 of those years to January 1953 at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City, and you might not have predicted this moment. Interest was strong in GM’s new fiberglass-bodied sports car, yes, but with a 150-hp “Blue Flame” inline-six under the hood backed by a two-speed Powerglide automatic, it wasn’t exactly the all-conquering automotive hero we know today. Chevrolet built just 300, and even those had trouble finding homes—you could only buy them in white with red interiors, which didn’t help the case. The do-it-yourself ragtop and curtain windows that only worked with the roof in place weren’t any more enticing when it came time to close a sale.



It was, however, enough to get the attention of an engineer by the name of Zora Arkus-Duntov. Despite his honorary title of “father of the Corvette,” General Motors didn’t hire Arkus-Duntov until five months after he saw the car at the Motorama show in the Waldorf Astoria ballroom. Legendary GM designer Harley Earl came up with the original idea, his lieutenant Robert McLean styled it, and Chevy R&D boss Maurice Olley engineered it. Within a few years, Olley and Arkus-Duntov had the car straightened out and fitted with the first small block Chevy V-8 and a manual transmission, and it was off to the races.



Beyond the cars themselves, fortuitous associations with stardom cemented its place in American pop culture, first as the main characters' car on the popular TV show *Route 66*—sponsored by Chevrolet, with the company always ready to replace the car at the beginning of each season with an updated model—and by the end of the '60s as the car of the Apollo astronauts.

Chevy's chief engineer, Ed Cole, personally gifted astronaut Alan Shepard a '62 Corvette after he returned from space, and of course all the other Mercury astronauts and the later Apollo astronauts would want one, too. Florida dealer and previous Indianapolis 500 winner Jim Rathmann offered the national heroes new Corvettes for \$1 each every year until the end of the Apollo program. Many of them had their cars custom painted, and today you can see several at the National Corvette Museum in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Yes, there's a museum just for historic Corvettes.

The Corvette is everywhere you look in American pop-culture history over the past 75 years. It's been featured in songs by artists ranging from The Beach Boys to George Jones to Sir Mix-a-Lot to, most famously, Prince's 1983 hit "Little Red Corvette." On the small screen, it was Sam Malone's favorite car in *Cheers*. On the big screen, it's been in everything from *Terms of Endearment* to the *Transformers* series to *Corvette Summer*. Barbie drove a modified first-generation model in her latest blockbuster (an EV conversion with blended styling cues from '56 and '57), and she's had 26 of them since she picked up her first in 1976. Ken and Barbie's friend Shani have each also had one.



On the track, the Corvette has paced the Indy 500 a record 21 times, and the factory-backed Corvette Racing team was utterly dominant at home and abroad. Formed in 1999, it won the 24 Hours of Le Mans nine times, the Rolex 24 Hours of Daytona four times, the American Le Mans Series championship 10 times, the IMSA Weather Tech Sports Car Championship five times, and the FIA World Endurance Championship once.

Motor Trend has a hand in the Corvette's legacy, too. We've named it our Car of the Year three times (1984, 1998, and 2020) and Performance Vehicle of the Year once (2023). We've put a Corvette on our cover 114

times over the past 75 years, with 90 of those instances occurring since 1983. We've reported on rumored mid-engine Corvettes since at least 1970.



We started the whole Corvette versus Porsche 911 rivalry in the '60s, we were the first to pit a 'Vette against a jet in the '80s, and we did it again in the 2010s. We even spoiled the surprise of the fifth-generation Corvette with an illustration on the cover of our April 1995 issue (the car didn't make its debut until '97) so close to the real thing that it caused a scandal inside GM HQ and demands to know our source.



We did it again in 2014. A full five years before Chevy revealed the C8, we reported accurately that a mid-engine Corvette was finally happening. As early as 1959, Arkus-Duntov was already working on a mid-engine car.



The first Chevrolet Engineer Research Vehicle—CERV-I—wasn't a Corvette per se, but the mid-engine race car prototype would be the start of Arkus-Duntov's long and ultimately futile struggle to reimagine the model as a mid-engine sports car. He personally oversaw the construction of the CERV-II race car prototype and six Corvette-bodied mid-engine street car prototypes. Yet 45 years and three more dead-end concepts followed his retirement before the mid-engine C8 Corvette's 2019 debut.



Chevy has sold more than 1.8 million Corvettes over the past 71 years, eight generations, and two powertrain layouts. They've come with automatic, manual, and dual-clutch transmissions offering anywhere from two to eight ratios. Under the hood of the various production cars and concepts, there have been pushrod inline-sixes, pushrod and dual-overhead-cam V-8s, superchargers, turbochargers, a hybrid system, and even rotary engines. They've been featured in countless movies, TV shows, songs, and magazine covers, and they've been owned by more celebrities than we can list up to and including our current president. They've been everything from racing champions to world-beating supercars to the preferred ride of the white-tank-top-and-gold-chain set and of white New Balance and jorts aficionados everywhere.



More than anything, though, the Corvette is America's sports car, and it's your No. 1 automotive icon of the past 75 years.