GM Marks 60th Year Since Debut of Its Iconic 'Sports Car of Choice,' the 'Vette

Chevrolet last week marked its 60th anniversary of the Corvette.

The first Corvette went into production in Flint on June 30, 1953.

"During the past six decades, the Corvette has been woven into the fabric of American culture, as the sports car of choice for movie stars, musicians and astronauts," said Chris Perry, vice president, Chevrolet Marketing. "The very best Corvettes represent the state-of-the-art for their eras in terms of design, technology and performance."

Here are some key facts highlighting 60 years of Corvette history:

• Corvette is the world's longest-running, continuously produced passenger car. The longest-running vehicle of any type is the Chevrolet Suburban.

• Corvette made its debut as a concept vehicle at the General Motors Autorama in New York City on Jan. 17, 1953. It was such a success that a limited run of 300 production Corvettes began on June 30 of that year.

• All 1953 models were Polo White with a red interior and they were priced at $3,498. In 2006, the third 1953 Corvette produced sold for a record $1.06 million at auction.

• Corvette was exclusively available with an inline six-cylinder engine until 1955. That year, the optional V8 engine was ordered by 90 percent of buyers. The six-cylinder was dropped in 1956. Corvette has been available exclusively with V8 power since.

• Corvette was produced only as a convertible for its first 10 years. The fixed-roof 1963 "split-window" Corvette Sting Ray coupe launched the second-generation Corvette. Sales doubled and it became a year-round car for drivers in colder climates.

• Approximately 1.56 million Corvettes have been produced since June 30, 1953. The 500,000th Corvette was built in 1977; the 1 millionth was built in 1992, and the 1.5 millionth Corvette rolled off the line in 2009.

• Corvettes have been produced at three facilities: Flint, Mich. (1953); St. Louis, Mo., (1954-1981); and Bowling Green, Ky. (1981-2014). The change from St. Louis to Bowling Green happened during the production year. The first 1981 Corvette was built in St. Louis, and the last 1981 Corvette was built in Bowling Green.

• No 1983 Corvettes were sold to the public. The model year was skipped in preparation for the all-new 1984 Corvette, which launched the C4 generation. Forty-four Corvette prototypes were built as 1983 models. Only one remains, and it is on display at the National Corvette Museum in Bowling Green, Ky.

The first Corvettes came off the line in Flint 60 years ago last week.

2013 SRT Viper's Life Chronicled in Book

by Jim Stickford

Fans of the Dodge Viper got to meet some of their heroes – the engineers and designers who helped make that vehicle a classic – last week when Maurice Liang, author of "SRT Viper: America's Super Car Returns," visited local a meeting place for car enthusiasts at Auto Zone of Birmingham.

Several men who worked on the Viper over the years were also at the store, which sells auto memorabilia. Many who purchased Liang's book asked the designers and engineers to sign their copies of the book and of scale models of the Viper.

Among those who were at the store was Scott Krugger, senior design manager for the Chrysler Design Institute. He worked as lead exterior designer for the 2013 Viper SRT.

"I decided to come to Maurice's book signing with a couple of other key engineers," Krugger said. "The Viper is really an iconic vehicle. So we tried to keep the form of the new one sexy and make sure the car was beautiful and styled true to its iconic heritage."

Mark Trostle, head of design for the 2013 SRT Viper, said he came to the recent book signing to show his support for Liang.

"Our customers are passionate about the Viper," Trostle said. "The new SRT was designed so it was something customers would enjoy washing in their driveways. You want to touch it, dry it. It becomes an emotional experience. That's how I look at cars, being connected to them, being a designer. I enjoy looking at the shape of the car as much as driving the car. This Viper is the most refined one yet. It has a refined fit and finish and it has traction control."

The government made Chrysler put in traction control, Trostle said. But many Viper customers love the raw feeling of power they get from driving one, so Dodge made it possible for drivers to turn off traction control if they so desired.

Dick Winkles, chief engineer of the Viper powertrain, said the 2013's powertrain is more refined. Its 640 horsepower is up 40 hp over the last model.

"Because we have electronic stability control, our customers can drive with more confidence," Winkles said. "The system is very transparent. Most people who drive it don't know it's even there. So we can now make the engine much more responsive, much quicker. I've been with the Viper since the day it started, back in April of 1989. It was always a 'back to basics' car. I like muscle cars and their power; I have three of them myself. So when they talked about adding these traction control features, I wasn't so sure. But it's worked out well."

Jay Herbert, co-founder of the Viper Club, came out from California to support his friend Liang, who was the other co-founder of the club.

"I live in Sunnydale, Calif.," Herbert said. "We started the club back in 1993. My Viper is the RT-10, and I am pondering getting a new one. I also run the International Viper Registry. I got my first Viper because I was a Cobra fan and this vehicle was the Cobra I never got to own. I fell in love with the Viper in 1989 at the Chicago Auto Show. I became a 'Viper prospect' then and there. I've driven the new one and it's phenomenal. It's everything a Viper can be and more."

Liang said he was asked to write the book on the development of the 2013 SRT Viper because of his long association with the Viper as both an owner of several models – the 1993 RT-10, the 1996 GTS and the 2008 SRT-10 Coupe – and as the co-founder of the Viper Club.

Liang said he worked for 17 years as an engineer for Hewlett-Packard and even wrote the Viper Buyers' Guide, so when Ralph Gilles said that he recognized Liang's passion for the car and "asked me if I wanted to document the development process of the 2013 SRT, I said yes."

The company covered his travel expenses. He visited Detroit from California every couple of months and got to attend some Viper events nationally.

"I like the new car," Liang said. "They did a nice job of making the car sleeker and more voluptuous and faster. We Viper drivers love the whole 'king of the hill' aspect of driving a car with such raw power. This car has that while being more refined than previous models."

Herb Helbig was at the book signing and said the raw power aspect of the Viper was always a part of the car's DNA.

"I'm an engineer who has been with the Viper since 1989," Helbig said. "The design team really started as a collection of engineers who thought of themselves as guys working on a lot of cool stuff. We didn't have a lot of resources at the time and didn't even know if the car would get built."

Helbig said that his knowledge of the Viper's history from its beginning has resulted in his being known in the "Viper Nation" as the Grail keeper. He said that when the first Vipers were sold, they expected two types of buyers. One would be the collector, – after all, $50,000 in 1989 was a lot of money – and the other would be people with discretionary income who wanted a fast car.

What they found, Helbig said, were people from all over the income spectrum buying the car.

"We saw that it wasn't just rich people buying the Viper," Helbig said. "It had so much charisma that all sorts of people were buying it."

Helbig said he's driven the new SRT and it's an amazing car. Most importantly, he said, that while it's a 21st-century car, it has the just the right blend of "performance" combined with a "civilized" touch so that people who wouldn't have considered purchasing a Viper in the past would do so now.

"It's not easy by any stretch of the imagination, getting the combination right," Helbig said. "I'd say it's harder than what we did back in 1989."

DRAGWAY RETROSPECT

by Dewey Ketner

'71 Javelin SST to Show at Onondaga

This is one of a series of columns to appear in the newspaper periodically. The author, Dewey Ketner, is a recognized expert on the subject of drag racing.

Fifty-eight years after Ford sent us a saddle pony in the first breeding of the Mustang, we oldtimers can bench race about the values of the Johnny-come-lately vehicles that oozed out of some factories and sprang out of more lively other plants that produced cars.

For those who followed the wheel-spinner performance vehicles, we tend to look at all vehicles, their engines, transmissions, rear axles, and imagine if we grind this, shave that, step up this, replace that, what can we get out of this sometimes-not-to-greatly-engineered "mover" that the factory missed.

Among the also "also-runs," we find non-exciting-looking mediocre performing vehicles that many a racer has rebuilt into top-performing racer type cars.

Such is the Javelin, introduced in 1967, produced thru 1974 – an early-on respectable-looking, good transportation car with a 232 c.i. 6-cylinder engine, and, also available for the sport-minded, a 343 c.i. V8 with 2 or 4 barrel, and their biggie, a 390 c.i. V8 at 315 horses! Transmissions were 3- and 4-speed manuals and 3-speed automatics, weighing in a 2,836 pounds. It had possibilities, but it would take a lot of reworking to make a goer of this iron.

This 1971 SST, has a 343 c.i. V8 breathing thru a 1-4 barrel carburetor with a 3-speed automatic transmission. For the got-to-go guys, the group 19 included a dual 4-barrel carburator, cross ram intake manifold, high-performance camshaft, and – get this – needle roller rocker arms, also dual-point ignition. Disc brakes were standard on many year models.

Did they get the attention of the youth group? A strong yes! Of the first 1,000 buyers the average age was 29. The numbers of production? The 1968 model run was more than 55,000. Sales were so good, the factory had Kaplan Engineering, in January of 1968, begin preparing two Javelins for the Sebring 12-hour race, Javelin's 1st Trans Am Race.

In it, they reached the mark they set, finishing 12th overall, 5th in class 'O', with a third in the over-2-liter class. Cars were built in a record 3 months.

Not enough racers went for the AMC-styled vehicle and, of course, the Big 3, especially GM (not really in the racing business) kept the stylist and performance engineers on a 24/7/365 hurry-up to produce a racing program.

This Javelin will be at the reopening of Onondaga Dragway in July.

The Javelin is owned by an Eagles Forever member, Steve Fullerton of Grass Lake, Mich.

Sign into "Onondaga Dragway News" for the current info on the dragstrip as it becomes available.

– Onondaga Dewey

GM Makes Global Changes In Design Leadership Roles

With joint strategies, theme development and innovation in mind, GM is making several changes to its global Design leadership team.

The changes, said Ed Welburn, vice president, Global Design, are designed to increase the emphasis on the company's vehicle brands, including Opel and Buick.

"I am confident," said Welburn, "that this alignment will continue to unite our global team around its passion for designing vehicles that make an emotional connection with customers – and our mission that every new product we develop has to be a great vehicle."

The GM Design employees receiving new assignments, effective Sept. 1, are:

• Mark Adams, currently executive director, Global Cadillac and Buick Design and GME vice president, Design, will return to Germany and assume the position of GME vice president, Design, and champion for Opel/Buick brand strategies and design language.

• Andrew Smith, currently design director, Holden Design, will be promoted to executive director, Global Cadillac and Buick Design, replacing Mark Adams. Smith will be the champion for the Cadillac brand and will lead the Global Color and Trim team. He will be based in Warren, Mich.

• Ken Parkinson, currently executive director, Global Chevrolet and GMC Design, will be executive director, Global Chevrolet Design and Architecture. Parkinson will be the champion for the Chevrolet brand.

• Helen Emsley, currently design director, Interior Full-Size Truck and Performance Car, will be promoted to executive director, Global GMC Design and User Experience. Emsley will be the champion for the GMC brand.

• John Puskar, currently design director, Global Color & Trim, will replace Emsley as design director, Interior Full-Size Truck and Performance Car.

• Sharon Gauci, currently design manager, Buick Color & Trim, will be promoted to the position of design director, Global Color and Trim, replacing Puskar.

• Clay Dean, director, Global Advanced Design, will continue to lead Advanced Design in North America. He will also be the champion for Advanced Design activities globally.

The first and largest global automotive OEM design function, according to GM officials, General Motors Design has a network of 10 Design Centers in seven countries around the world.

More than 2,000 men and women are responsible for the design development of every GM concept and production car and truck globally.

The Design Centers are located in the United States, Germany, Korea, China, Australia, Brazil and India.

Welburn is just the sixth Design leader in GM history and the first to lead all of the company's Global Design Centers. Under Welburn's strategic eye, each of GM's eight global passenger car brands is distinctive in form and vocabulary from one another as well as from other brands in the marketplace. Cadillac and Buick have each undergone a design renaissance, and Chevrolet has become a global brand with a globally recognized design language.

GM Design, established in 1927 as "The Art and Colour Section" by the legendary Harley Earl, celebrated its 85th year in 2012.