

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

LOOKING BACK ON A LIFETIME OF GREAT CARS.

RECENTLY, I WAS ASKED TO DESCRIBE the cars that were my favorites during my roughly 70 years of car ownership. The task required some thought. The most expensive or most exotic or most recently acquired come to mind first, but do they qualify as lifetime favorites?

I've settled on some simple criteria: vehicles that were more than a car, but were also constant sources of pleasure, demanding to be driven for the sheer joy of being in the car. Not coincidentally, those are the ones that stick in the memory—their sounds, smells, and idiosyncrasies easily recalled, despite the passage of many years. They are the ones that were sold or traded, for one reason or another, and their departure is regretted to this day.

The first real favorite was my 1952 MG TD, purchased used in 1955 in Pensacola, Florida, where I underwent Navy-Marine flight training. It accompanied me from base to base, with all my gear crammed into the passenger side. I raced it in SCCA events. If there were no Porsches entered, or they were being poorly driven, I was very competitive.

Fast-forward to 1962, the end of active duty; I was a graduate student at University of California, Berkeley, business school. Logic, in the form of two children, dictated an affordable sedan, but what? I was an avid reader of *Road & Track* and *Sports Cars Illustrated* (later known as *Car and Driver*), smitten by the layout and technology of the Chevrolet Corvair.

The late, great David E. Davis Jr., then a copywriter at the Chevrolet ad agency Campbell Ewald, had crafted a mini-magazine, direct-mail piece aimed squarely at import-car owners. Richly endowed with cutaways and technical

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drawings, it described the Corvair basically as a large, affordable four-door Porsche 356.

That masterfully written piece drove me directly to a Chevrolet dealer—several, of them. Some tried to sell me a full-size V-8 “for the same amount of money”; others categorically refused to place my special order—a Monza four-door, four-speed manual, 3.55:1 final drive. One dealer, an

MG fan, took my order, and the car arrived after nine endless weeks. It was spectacular; the proportions for that era were unbeatable. The color was a metallic autumn gold.

I loved that car after the first hundred feet. The ergonomics were excellent, the gearing well chosen; 102 hp motivated the relatively light car well. And the engine sound, rumbling from the stern, with a bit of cooling-blower whine thrown in, was magic.

Soon, I couldn't leave it stock. I retrofitted Koni dampers, an EMPI camber-compensator, shorter steering arms for 3.2 turns lock-to-lock, and expensive “cerametallic” brake linings, the poor man's disc brakes. My modest woodworking skills enabled me to clad all the horrible waffled-aluminum surfaces with walnut veneer. The stock instrument cluster gave way to a large, walnut-framed one, featuring a full complement of Stewart-Warner gauges. It was almost Jaguar-esque!

The final modification was to dump the OEM Firestone two-ply “rubberized paper” tires after two blowouts during sustained high-speed driving. Steel-belted Michelin Xs provided more precision, better handling, and much better grip in the wet. I had many an enjoyable impromptu race against European cars of better pedigrees. They were never able to shake it.

Maybe it was because the Corvair was a family-car-cum-sport sedan. Maybe it was because I had so much personal creative effort invested in it. It was my all-time favorite car. Not the best, but my favorite. ■

Bob Lutz has been The Man at several car companies. Ask him about cars, the auto industry, or life in general.

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