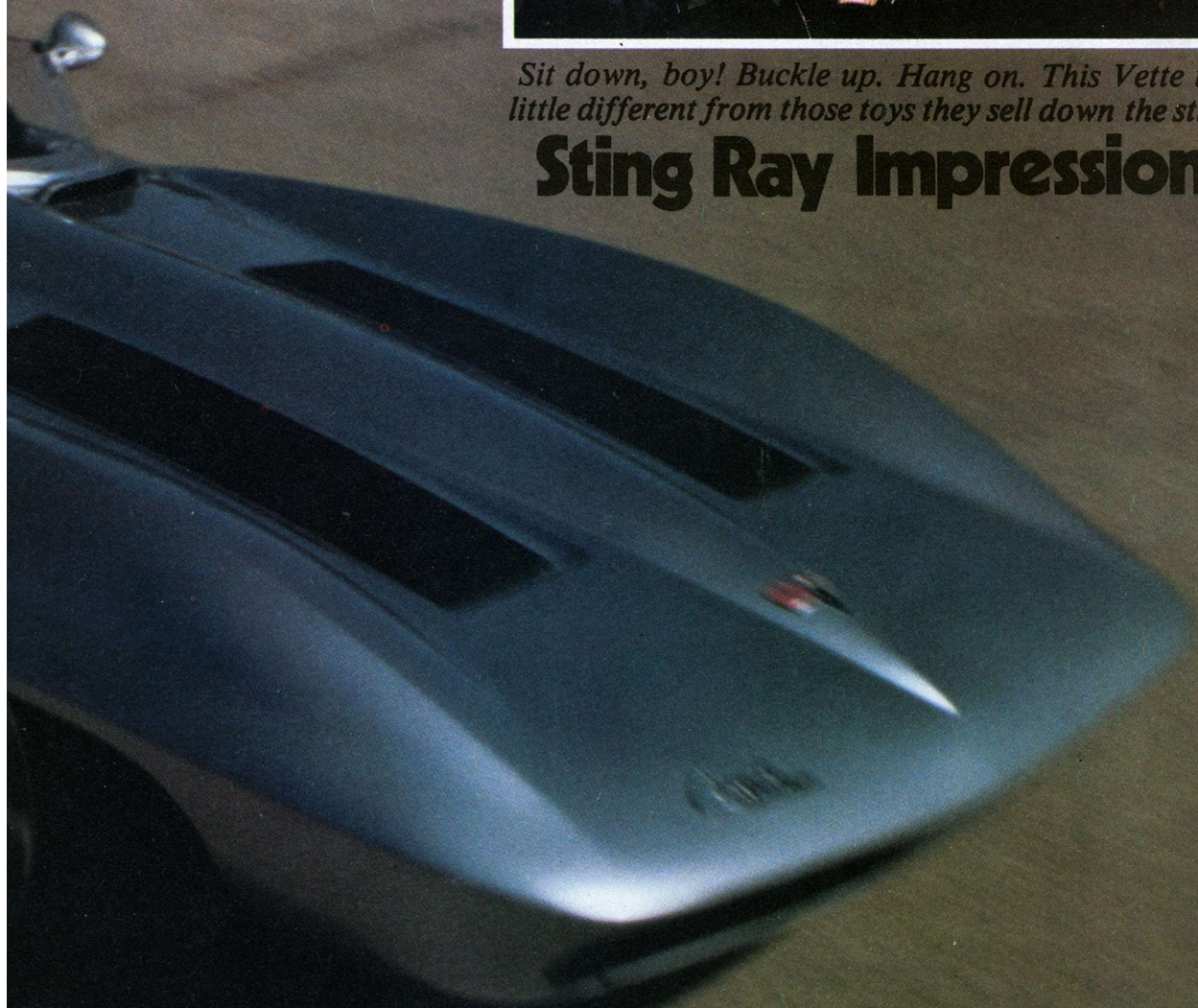


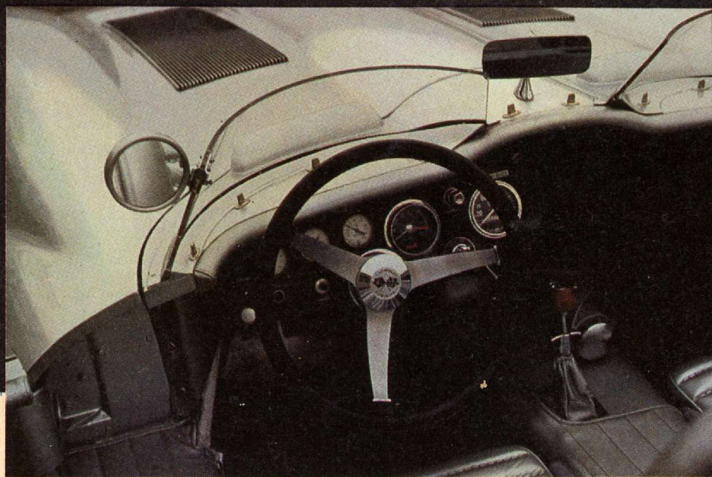
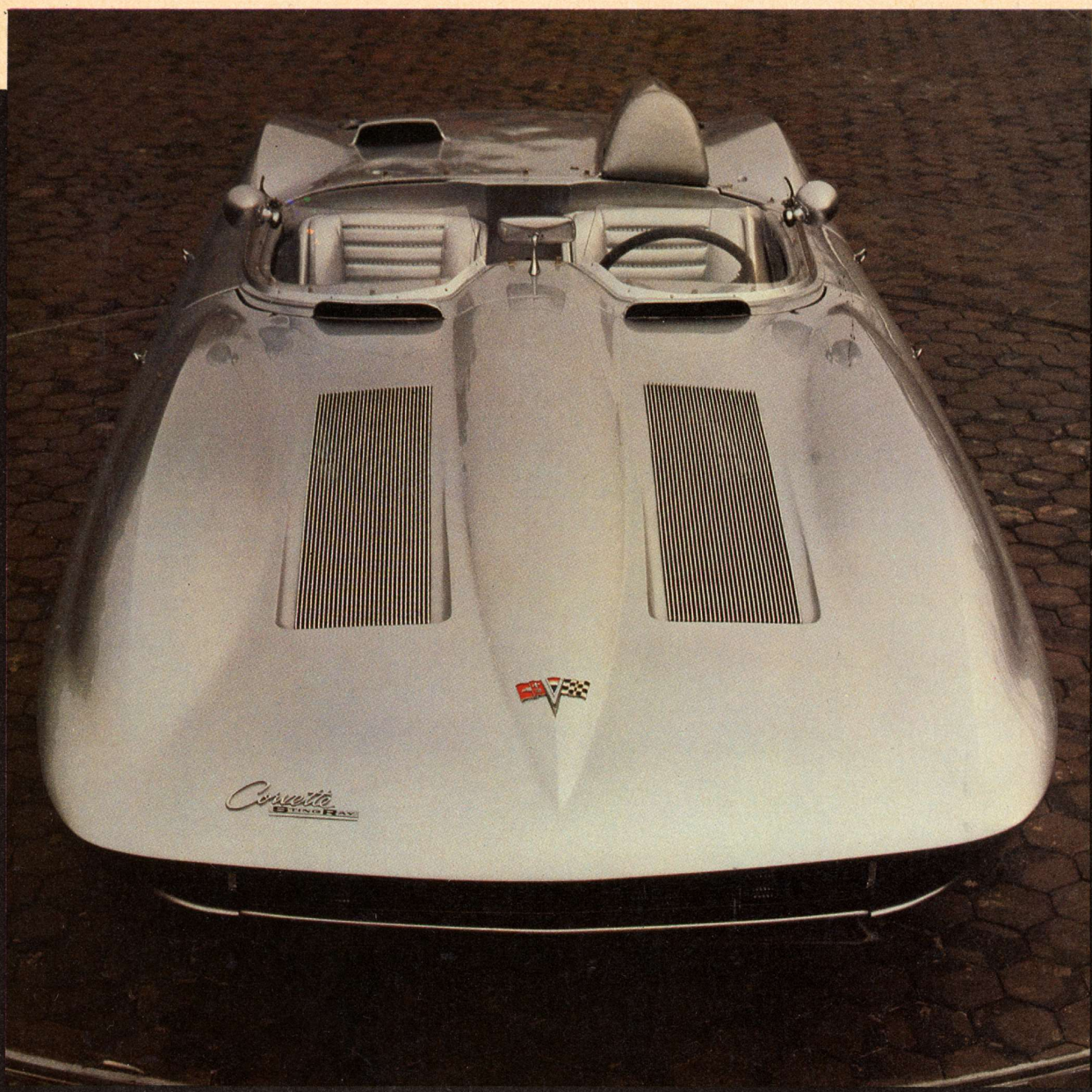




Sit down, boy! Buckle up. Hang on. This Vette is a little different from those toys they sell down the street.

Sting Ray Impressions





Corvette
STINGRAY

*"The quintessential Mitchell machine ex-
hudes function—and not surprisingly, it's
a blast to drive. As we learned. . . .*

STING RAY DRIVING IMPRESSIONS

Dick Henderson has a heavy foot. The Sting Ray comes out of the tight right-hander at the south end of the Tech Center track, tires mildly squeaking, steering wheel flapping in his hands. He's in the middle of Second, maybe 60 miles an hour. He looks over and grins at me wickedly. And that lead foot drops like a runaway boulder onto the unsuspecting gas pedal.

I'm precariously braced on one knee against the driveshaft tunnel, standing nearly erect, looking through a flat, wide-angle camera lens. The blast of air catches my glasses at the same time the world explodes around my ears and the seat boogaloos a foot behind me. Henderson finds the floor and holds it there. Tumbled into the seat in a heap, glasses, camera and lenses scattering, I'm literally pinioned to the seat back until Henderson gaily pauses to shift gears.

I twist around, only to catch Third full in the face as that foot drops again. At 120, the airstream feels like it wants to take the top of my head off. We pound down the patchy test track-concrete, a narrow two lanes wide, nail an unsuspecting turbocharged Chevette as we go into the left hander at the end of the straight and rocket into the high-banked bowl of the Monza Wall.

Henderson has the needle pegged, the G-force pulling his cheeks grotesquely down around his chin, the suspension bottomed against the stops. The Sting Ray tracks around happily, moving easily in Henderson's hands, the cords in his forearms standing out tight and rigid. He is smiling, a dreamy, far-away smile of a satiated man who knows that he can sustain this feeling as long as he wants, a contented man at ease with his harsh environment.

We shoot out of the bowl, foot steady on the gas, and then, with a response that literally takes your breath away, we rocket forward as the injectors dump all they can into the madly sucking valves. Henderson leaves his foot on the floor until the last possible moment. When he lifts, it is with reluctance, as if some great weight is pushing us onward. Dick Henderson has a heavy foot.

The Sting Ray belongs to the luckiest group of mechanics in the world, GM Styling's Special Vehicles section. Special Vehicles is GMese for "show cars." The half-dozen professionals in Special Vehicles are the ones who maintain and

transport the various General Motors show cars from the Chicago Auto Show to Monaco for the Grand Prix, from Ontario to Indy for the 500. They are the elite of Bill Mitchell's shock troops, the favored sons who live in a world of dream cars, far removed from the everyday cares of management, design, production and marketing. Special Vehicles is Bill Mitchell's version of worry beads. It's where he goes when he wants to hide out, when he wants a respite from the manifold pressures of being Bill Mitchell.

Dick Henderson and Kenny Eschebach are the leaders of this fortunate band, and it is their pleasant duty to spend their days ministering to Aerovettes, Manta Rays, Mako Sharks and Sting Rays. Any time he wants to, without even a good excuse, Dick Henderson can hop in the fabulous Sting Ray, drive half a mile to the test track and blow the carbon and cobwebs out at 150 mph. For him, it's all in a day's work; for most people it would be a fair approximation of heaven.

The Sting Ray came into Special Vehicles late in 1960, as soon as it returned from racing on the West Coast. Kenny Eschebach came back full time, and the Mitchell racing team was shut down. The Sting Ray was completely refurbished, given a real windshield, a tonneau cover and Corvette emblems. It then went to the Chicago Auto Show in February 1961 in what turned out to be a successful bid to elicit public support for the Sting Ray shape on the production Corvette.

At that point, the real job of the Sting Ray was done. Mitchell had cleverly used the racing success of the car to build interest in the shape, then used that public interest as an argument to get the shape into production. From the time the Q-model was first drawn up in 1957 until the production '63 Corvette appeared, it was over five years. But in all that time, Mitchell never lost his faith in the radical Shinoda shape, even though he later had a falling out with Shinoda himself. Of all his wars with engineering, marketing and management, the Sting Ray program was the most drawn out . . . and the most successful.

Its races run, the Sting Ray was turned out to pasture in 1962. It was given a passenger seat, a passenger windshield and a speedometer. The full-race Sting Ray became Mitchell's personal transportation. It finally got the Dunlop disc brakes it had needed all along, and then when Zora Duntov became involved in a fight over whether the 427 big block belonged in the lightweight Corvette, he

borrowed the Sting Ray to fit it with a 377 cubic inch smallblock. With this, he tried to convince Ed Cole that the big block was overkill. When that failed, the Sting Ray itself got a 427, complete with four Weber carbs that poked through the hood. In this form, with a transparent plastic hood scoop, it blushed Ferrari red.

Finally, Mitchell took the long-suffering Sting Ray back to Special Vehicles and had it restored. It is now silver again, with a silver leather interior. The hood is smooth, and Duntov's fantastic fuel-injected, 377 cubic inch smallblock is back under it. For the New York Auto Show in 1977, Eschebach and Henderson cleaned up the Sting Ray once again, making it absolutely pristine.

The Sting Ray today is a better car than it was in 1960. It has disc brakes now, a show car finish and an out-of-this-world 377 motor. It's a fantastic piece, an absolute jewel in every way. Mitchell, Henderson and Eschebach get a little misty when they talk about it, and it's the kind of car you can just sit and look at for hours and always discover something new. Of all the Mitchell cars, it's easily the best, and of all the Larry Shinoda designs, it's easily the best again. Bred from the ill-fated Sebring SS, progenitor of the classic '63 Split Window, the Sting Ray marks a major turning point not only in Bill Mitchell's career, but also in the styling history of General Motors. A fabulous, perfect car.

Henderson is still grinning away, wanting more. He softly stabs the brakes, then harder as we plunge deep into the right hander. I have a momentary flash of what it must have been like for Dick Thompson to race this monster, diving into corners like this at full chat, knowing there were no brakes left at all. Then I'm grabbing onto the dashboard for dear life, trying to keep from falling on top of Henderson as he slams through the righthander and the gears, all at the same time.

Into that snakey left, then right again in Second, the two of us rattling shoulder to shoulder with jarring force. He's back at the beginning of the mile-long straight, pushing it now. He looks at me and lifts his right hand, palm up, as if to say, "Well. . . ?" I smile and give him "thumbs up." Before my hand is down out of the airstream, the Sting Ray is back at the top end of Third, deep into triple figures. I don't need to look to know that Henderson is laughing out loud. I'm laughing too. He catches Fourth at 6500. —Rich Taylor

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