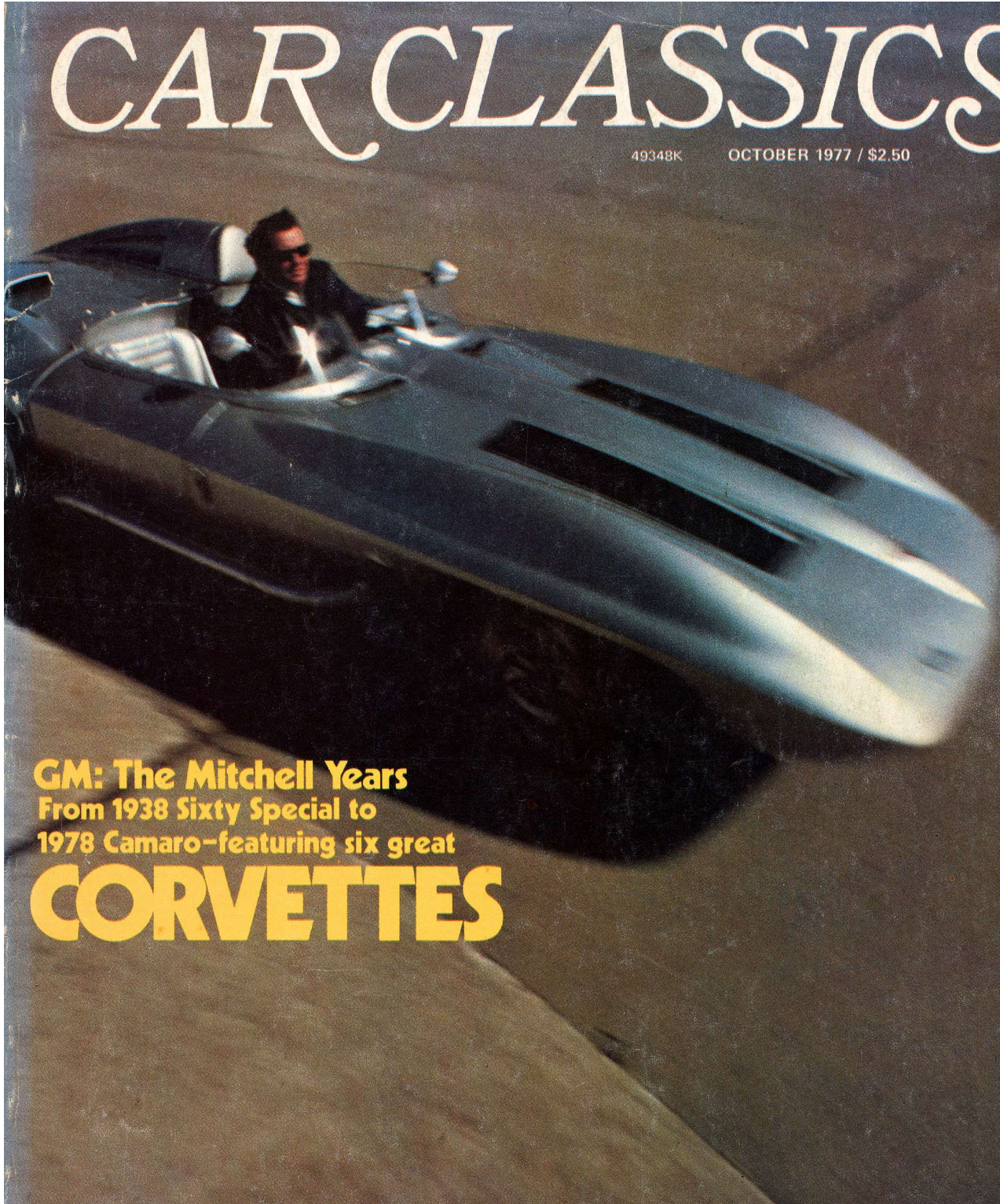


CAR CLASSICS

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GM: The Mitchell Years
From 1938 Sixty Special to
1978 Camaro—featuring six great
CORVETTES

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The Mature Stylist

It's been quite a while since those sway-backed horses of the late Fifties. Here are some of Mitchell's cars responsible for the metamorphosis.

One man has been responsible for the shapes of over 100-million production cars and trucks, better than half of all the vehicles produced in this country in the last two decades. Not to mention General Motors cars and trucks in England, Germany and Australia and everything from diesel locomotives to microwave ovens produced by the various divisions of GM and designed by the corporate Styling staff. More than any industrial designer in history, Bill Mitchell has affected the appearance of our environment.

Happily enough for all of us, Mitchell himself has pretty decent taste. He's drawn his share of clunkers, for sure, but all in all, his batting average is remarkably good. Mitchell has been responsible for some really superb-looking production cars—the '63 Corvette, for example. And the smooth, 1963 Riviera, the first American design to really show an understanding of traditional razoredge styling. The '66 Toronado/Riviera/Eldorado is a collector car already, and one reviewer once called them, collectively, "the most beautiful full-size cars ever." At the opposite end of the scale, there's the little Vega/Astre—a bad car to be sure—but one with the cleanest styling of any small car since Giugiaro's Fiat 850 Spyder.

And then there are the best-looking production cars of the Mitchell Era: the second series Corvair and the second series Camaro/Firebird. The Corvair and Camaro are the first high-style, mass-market American cars since the '53 Studebaker Starliner, and easily the cleanest American cars since Mitchell's own Cadillac 60 Special. The Corvair is already a collector car of sorts, and someday the Camaro and Firebird are going to be blue chip investments, complete with big pricetags.

There's obviously a lot more to Bill Mitchell than his quotable, brash outspokenness, his tongue-in-cheek pomposity and his coordinated designer clothes. He's the best styling chief any Detroit corporation has ever had, and it's no secret that GM is far and away the style leader of the American automobile industry . . . and has been for 20 years. Bill Mitchell's ego and antics have been tolerated in GM board meetings for so

long because, unlike the other wishy-washy designers in Detroit, Mitchell delivers the goods. His cars are brash and impudent—but also clever, tasteful and genuine visual knock-outs.

Mitchell's distinctive flair has always been strong enough to survive the inevitable cuts and compromises that go to get a car into production. Despite the conflicting demands of product planning, engineering, production, marketing, sales, promotion and management, styling has always won out in the end. But even Mitchell admits that his production cars aren't as good as they should be. Too many cooks have watered down the soup by the time any car rolls out of the GM kitchen.

If you really want to see the Mitchell style, you have to look at his styling studies, the showcars, where the style is purest. For almost every successful production car, Mitchell's staff built at least one, lifesize, running prototype. These were exhibited all over the country, to get a real grassroots feel for what the public wanted. The racing-oriented SR-2 was the first of these showcars, but like the Sting Ray, it turned out—in the hands of Corvette racer Jim Jeffords—to be a bonafide, real-world racing car, too.

The 1957 Q-model Corvette was meant to be a showcar, but it never got out of the modeling room. The similar Sting Ray was the next of Mitchell's showcars, and the one that is still the best remembered. After the Sting Ray came a veritable legion of styling studies, from the early Mako Shark to today's Aerovette. In almost every instance, the cars have been striking, cleverly engineered and beautifully constructed. The cars that didn't make the grade were summarily junked, and you could fill a scrapbook with the second rank showcars that General Motors has deliberately destroyed over the last 30 years.

What's left in the big warehouse on Twelve Mile Road in Warren, Michigan, across the street from the Tech Center, are Bill Mitchell's personal favorites from two decades at GM Styling. Styling is a one-man show with Mitchell at the top, surrounded by sixteen hundred and ninety-nine little Indians. If Mitchell had a reason, the showcar was kept. If there

wasn't a reason—and Mitchell always has a reason for everything he does—the car was scrapped. In a very real sense, then, the showcars that General Motors Styling has just promised to the Sloan Museum as a permanent display are the favorite cars of William Mitchell, the hand-picked ones by which he wants us to remember the Mitchell Era.

THE MATURE STYLE: BILL MITCHELL PICKS HIS FAVORITE CARS

TAYLOR: What are your favorite cars?

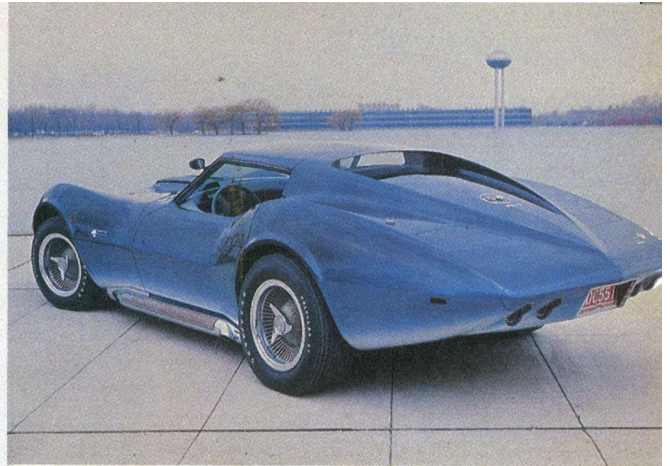
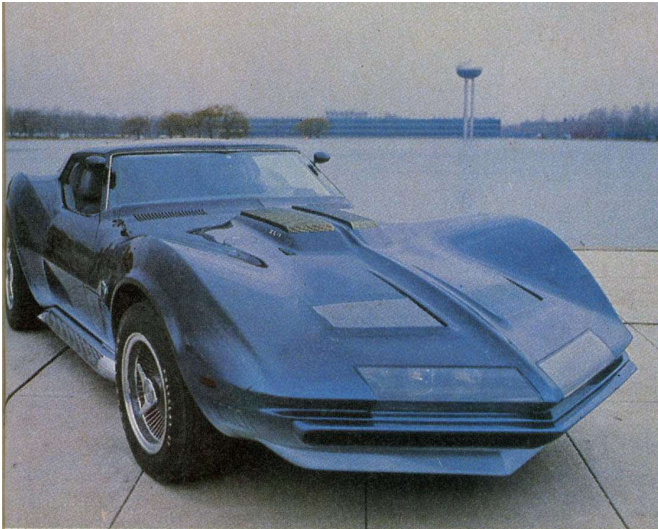
MITCHELL: Well, I think any designer likes to do the special cars, the limited production cars. Like the Eldorado and the first Riviera. And the Toronado was the first in a very unusual series that was fun. And then the Eldo that came out of that was such a hit, and everyone wanted the Toronado to look more like an Eldo. I always thought it was a great accomplishment not to open up the front of the hood, making it look like a Cord. John Beltz was the head of Olds at that point, and he said he always admired the fact that I didn't give up on that hood.

And of course, the Corvair was a great car. It was so unusual at the time. I remember at the Paris Show, and Pinin Farina, Senior, said, "Bill, there're eight cars in this show that are Corvairs. They all love Corvairs."

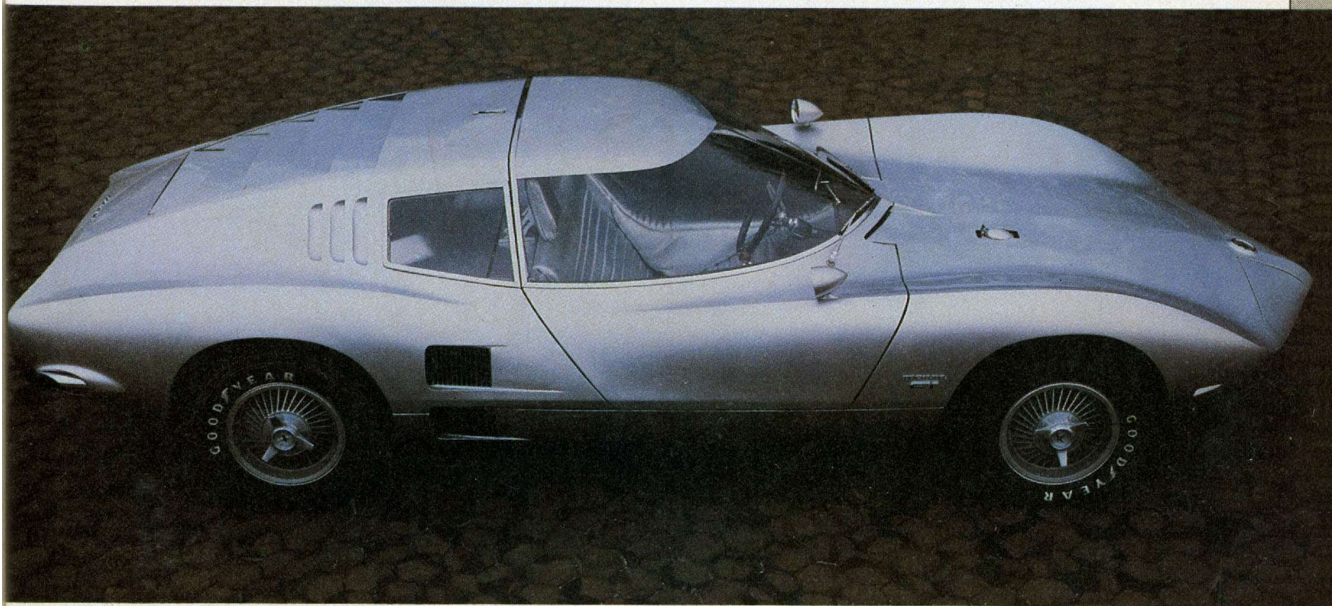
The Grand Prix, I liked a lot. That was the beginning, that and the Riviera. Prior to that, the sales people thought the more chrome you had, the better it was and the higher the price. These two cars eliminated chrome, and they sold fantastically. And they changed that thinking around. And the Europeans recognized it. They never liked our cars before, but this showed everyone that you could make an elegant American car without a lot of chrome.

And of course, there are Camaro and Firebird, the second series cars. The first ones were done too fast, we didn't get a chance to do much. But the second series cars have been in production for nine years now, and they're selling better than ever.

TAYLOR: My personal favorite of all your production cars is the Camaro.

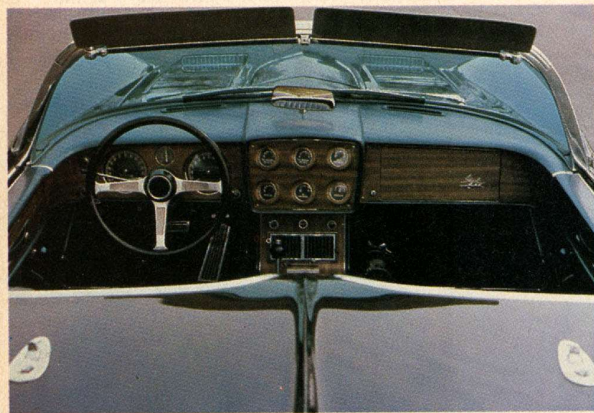


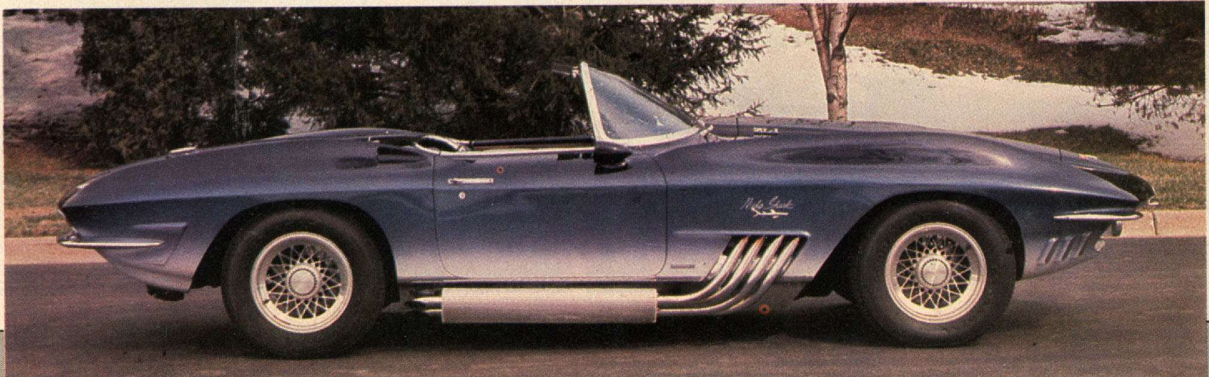
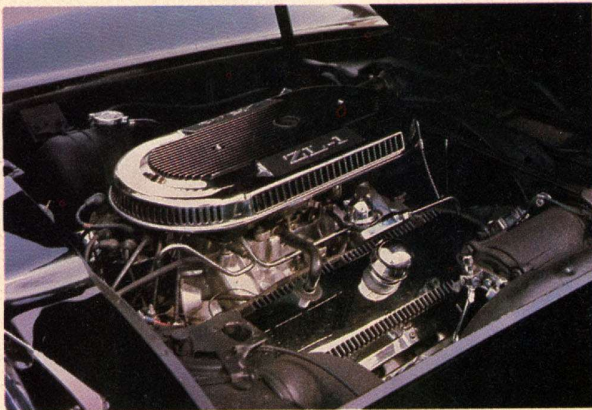
Left and above, Bill's Corvette Manta Ray: a little heavy at the front, we think, but flawless from the rear.





Our choice as the most imaginative Mitchell car, the Mako Shark. Inspired by the fish, it was a smashing design. With Can-Am engine, Mitchell says, "it goes like hell."







Above, the Monza SS and Bill Mitchell's personalized Corvette, which he'll take with him on retirement.



Above, SM's "Blue Boy" Eldo and custom Toronado with bent glass. Below, Firebird Banshee and 1978 Camaro.



MITCHELL: Stirling Moss saw the first one, and he said, 'Bill, you've really got a classic. The detail, it's not all carved up, it's got a nice swoop.' It's been very popular in Europe, too.

TAYLOR: What about the showcars?

MITCHELL: Those are my favorites . . . and here's a real favorite . . . the Mako Shark. You know the story of calling it a shark?

TAYLOR: Tell me again.

MITCHELL: Well, there was a shark on the wall out here in the lobby, and I got to looking at it. We named it shark, and painted it the same way, with the dark top and light underbody. Nobody had ever done that, and it worked well. It's got nice lines from the top. So many cars, the tops . . . just fall away. But the Mako Shark looks good from the top. It's got that old chassis, but a Can-Am engine—650 hp—and it's heavy. But it goes like hell. And it's great for holding the road.

TAYLOR: What about the Monzas, the GT and SS?

MITCHELL: The Monza GT was done first. I can never remember the dates. I have to have people around to tell me dates. But that car was a rush job, it was done over several times, in ten weeks or less. Chevrolet did the box construction chassis. They tested it at a couple of tracks, and it outperformed the Corvette. It only weighs 1500 pounds. I wanted a mid-engine car, but Chevrolet engineering said they could get the car to handle the same with the engine hanging out the back, and not have to re-engineer it. So I got Roger Penske, who was a great Porsche racer, to drive it. And he said he liked the Monza better.

About that time the whole Corvair program started to wane, and I couldn't interest management in it. It was just no go. That shutter on the rear window, that's the first one that was ever done. Today it's all the rage, but the Monza GT had it first. I wanted to get a new look, and still be able to see to back up. And have a strong profile without a big piece of glass.

TAYLOR: What was different about the Monza SS?

MITCHELL: That car was done to get a cheaper, sportier version. We didn't have all the gimmicks, no roof. We could get six-footers into that little devil. It's got a hell of a nice sound, with those short exhaust pipes. It goes Pop, Pop and scares all the dogs when you back off on it. And we had theatre seats in that one, so when you sit down the seat bottoms come down, just like ones in the theatre.

TAYLOR: I had a hell of a time trying to take pictures of that interior, because I couldn't get the seats to stay down. But the Monzas seem to be about the cleanest

designs of that era.

MITCHELL: Either of these cars, they could come out tomorrow. If you've got a good design, a classic design, it's going to be timeless. If you drive these cars down the street today, you'll draw a crowd.

TAYLOR: I see the beginnings of an Opel GT in this car.

MITCHELL: Oh yes. The Opel GT was done after this. It relates to the Sting-ray, too.

TAYLOR: Do you think in terms of themes?

MITCHELL: Take the first Riviera, for instance. There's a real classic theme. I was standing out in front of Claridge's Hotel in London one night, a foggy night, looking at a Rolls. And I thought, boy, if you could just lower that thing, with those sharp lines, you'd really have something. That became the first Riviera.

I planned it for Cadillac originally. That's why it had those two narrow grilles, one on each side, that reminded me of the old LaSalle grille. And I wanted to call it LaSalle. But Cadillac sales were up, they really didn't need any help. But Buick, Olds and Pontiac did. So I let them bid on it. The agreement was that we'd let them have it, but we wouldn't let them change it. Which is *really* the way to do a car. Buick put in the strongest bid, so they got it. And they didn't change it.

And then I did the Silver Arrow I. I wanted to get the drop on Ford. It was done as an answer to the Thunderbird. That car today is a knockout. I drove it home the other night . . . hell, I was going 100 mph . . . and it has terrific handling for a big car. This was built before emission controls. People see it and get excited. And I say, 'Hell, that car is 13 years old.' It's timeless. Now that's a good example of a classic theme. I put six inches into the hood and lowered the roof. You can't beat the proportions.

TAYLOR: It seems like a big car like this would be easier to do than a small car.

MITCHELL: That's why today, with all the small cars on the road, it's a tough problem for me. After all my days of doing cars, it's the first time I've had to make them shorter, narrower and higher. I always made them longer, wider and lower.

TAYLOR: You've done so many good sports cars, and yet you seem to really like the big cars.

MITCHELL: I like the Duesenberg, I like the big American Classics. The Blue Boy, that Eldorado convertible showcar. That was my attempt at a modern Duesenberg. Think about it. The size, everything, this is what a Duesenberg would look like today. We engineered the top to be lower, but still have the Eldorado line. The top bows fold inward and down,

which allows you to completely conceal the top and get a sculptured boot to go flat behind the seats and hide the top. And I've got wide white tires on it, because it's a Gatsby classic.

TAYLOR: Is that the reason for the basic Sheer style, the upright grille, the pontoon fenders?

MITCHELL: That's right. Our new Seville, Eldorado and Riviera will be smaller and lighter, you can get better mileage, but you can still keep that classic style.

TAYLOR: I notice you brought back that little rear fender vent motif from the '53 Cadillac.

MITCHELL: That's right. I wanted to play off that elegant style. Now the color, that's my wife. Powder blue with a powder blue leather interior. The Blue Boy is her car.

TAYLOR: Tell me about this Toronado.

MITCHELL: My God, that was done two or three years ago. It has the last vestige of that Cord-style hood, without a grille. You have to keep that heritage, because the used car market is a big market, and if you change too fast . . . hell, if you've got a guy that bought a car just at the end of the season, you can make his car look ten years old overnight. You have to keep that heritage. This Toronado is kind of interesting in other ways, too. It's the first car we did with the bent glass rear window that we now have on the Caprice. And it has a double electric sliding roof. You can't have a real convertible any more, but almost the whole roof of this car opens up, without those damn lift-out panels. You still have that convertible feeling, without the draft.

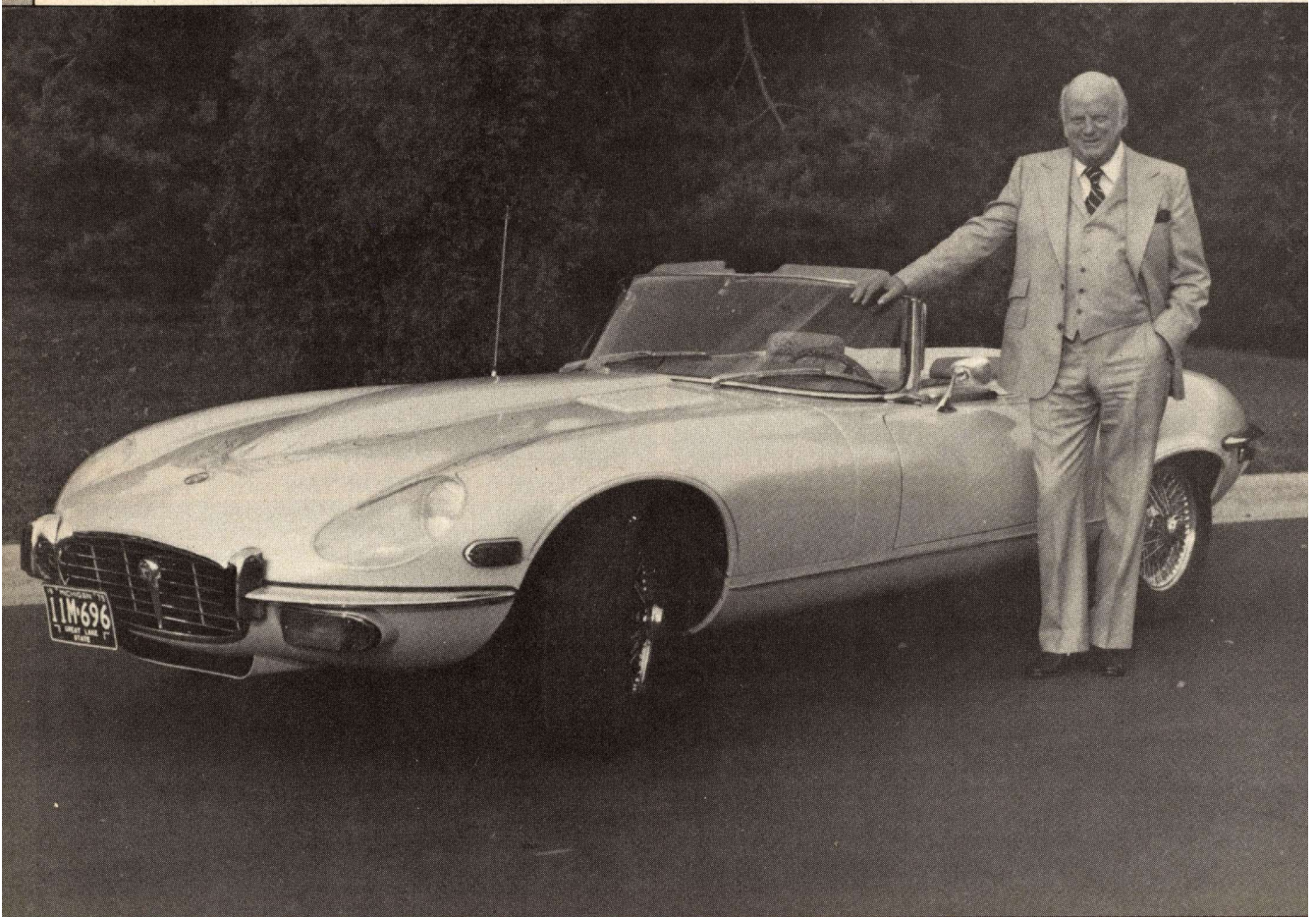
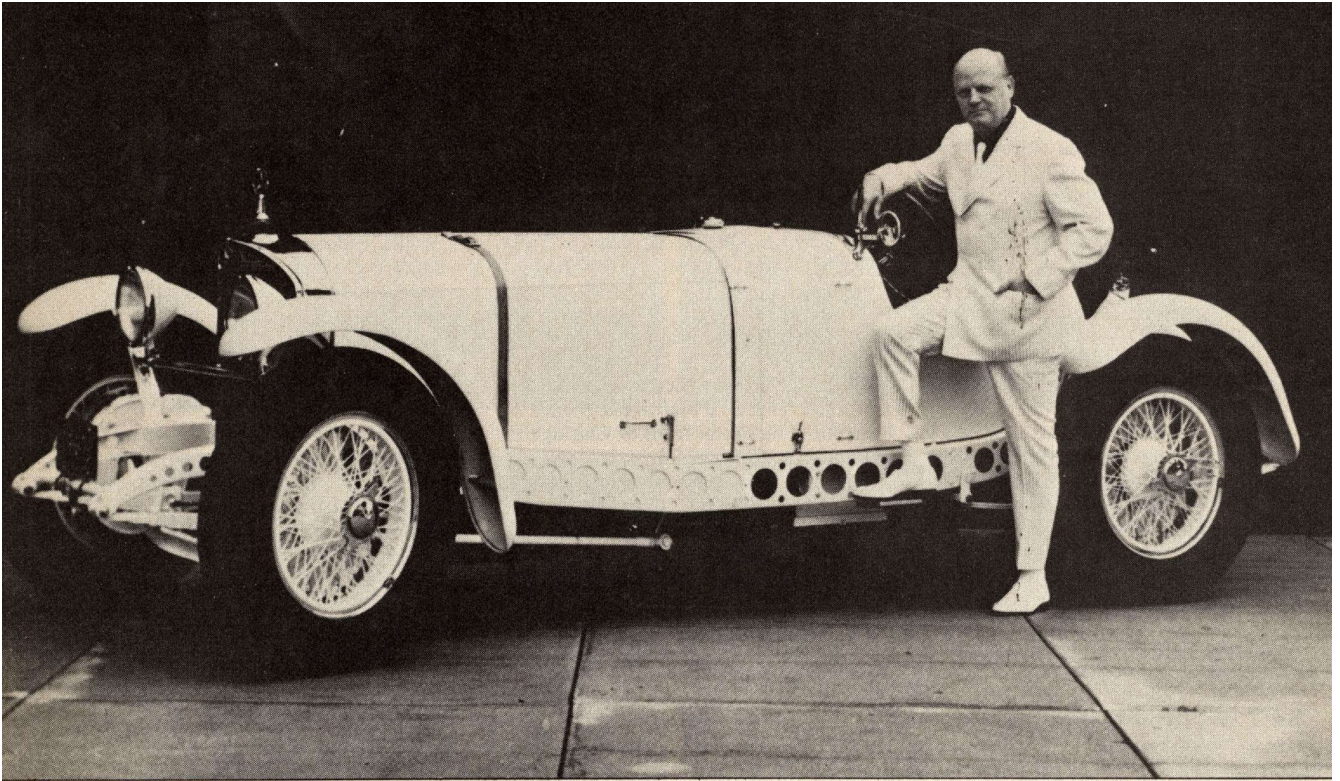
TAYLOR: The Seville, particularly this Elegante showcar, seems to me to be the best car you've got right now. It has a truly distinctive style.

MITCHELL: This was the beginning of the Sheer look that we've got in the '70s now.

TAYLOR: These cars . . . ten years from now will still look good. They'll last well.

MITCHELL: It's always said that the Seville was copied from Mercedes. The Seville is what a Mercedes could be, if they'd just let the stylists loose. I could go over there and in two days just go to the Stuttgart Museum where they have their Classics and do even better than this.

When we were working on the Seville, I went to Harrahs', and looked at his old Rolls-Royces. None of them had padded roofs, they finished them. But Cadillac wanted that padded roof. I took it off on this car, and for the new ones, too. They're completely finished. A padded top on a severe upper is all right with me, but I hate to see padded tops with flow-



ing lines and have that stuff falling all over the car. It looks ugly.

I like two tones, the two-tone scheme on this Seville. I took this to the Geneva Show in two-tone beige, and a silver and black one. This works well in two-tone silver, too. It's that two-tone Rolls look. I'm trying to get them to put this square end on the Rolls-Royce. David Plaistow is a good friend of mine. I go through their place looking for customers. I bring them over here and take them around. But it's a different aesthetic.

TAYLOR: I'm really interested in your Camaro Berlinetta. This seems to be one basic body that no matter what you do to it, it works.

MITCHELL: Yes. This will be the new 1978 Camaro. That's what we do with these cars, we don't just make them to show off. If you drive them around for two or three months and everybody likes them, you say to yourself, 'maybe I've got something.' That's the reason for the showcars. Hardly one we've had that

didn't go into production. Not the whole car, but at least part of it.

Now the Firebird Banshee is different. We didn't want to change the whole thing, so we cut out the backlight first. And then we changed the taillights, and the nose. The soft front is good. That front ended up on the new Firebird, and the backlight on the Caprice, with that folded glass. And the soft material in the front and back. Remember, we're playing with six headlights here, we've had that on three or four cars, all waiting for government approval.

Actually, I don't think any of our current headlights are powerful enough for fast driving at night. So that third light on each side would be a road light. It would dim automatically if someone came the other way. But it would give the distance you need down the road. The headlights to me ought to be used in the suburbs, and the suburb lights for parking. And then have another set for highways. The lights just aren't powerful enough.

Spotlights are a good thing. The Blue Boy, that Eldo, I've got to get some spotlights onto that before I take it. I had a Caddy when I got out of the Navy, with these spotlights fixed in the center, with another dimmer switch on the floor. I could drive 90 mph at night with those, and there were no superhighways then.

TAYLOR: Are we going to see those clusters of little Banshee taillights in production?

MITCHELL: No. Not that. That's too tricky for production. That's cheesecake. I took it to Paris and they hated it.

TAYLOR: I think my favorite of all the Corvette showcars you've done is the Mulsanne. It's a nice-looking Vette.

MITCHELL: It's the greatest Sting Ray We used it as the pace car for all the Can-Am races, way back. It has a powerful LT-1 engine. It's been around. It's been painted red, silver, blue, and now it's back to silver again. The nice thing about it is that you can take the whole roof off and the flagman can stand up and see the start and everybody can see him. Terrific.

TAYLOR: There's a lot more going on in the surface of this car than, say, on a Corvair. Scoops and spoilers and fins. There's a lot more surface tension.

MITCHELL: Yeah. These big engines have to breathe, so you have to cut holes in the body. The periscope really works as a rearview. I took the headlights, and just for interest, I took the flip-flop out. People don't really want gadgets, they want flexible things. They don't really want headlights that flop up and down. So you can put them up there and expose them, like they do on a lot of racers. This baby has changed quite a few times. This is a great show car, because it has so much animation and so many things happening on it.

TAYLOR: Almost too many things happening.

MITCHELL: Well, if you make a car too simple it's like Simple Simon. It doesn't hold your interest, it's just a smooth car.

TAYLOR: Is there a fine line between classical lines and dullness?

MITCHELL: Like they say, you've got to know when . . . a designer's got to know when to lift his brush.

TAYLOR: Which cars will you take with you when you retire? Have you decided?

MITCHELL: That red Corvette with the brass trim that we just finished. It's just a Corvette, but the best one around. I'll take just three cars with me. That Corvette, the Blue Boy Eldo and a station wagon. One for me, one for Mrs. Mitchell and one to drive. That oughta be enough, don't you think?

Bill Mitchell On on the World

Frank opinions on just about everything . . .

On getting people to recognize you: "Spit on the table and wipe it up with your hand. They'll remember that."

☆☆☆☆

On the Mercedes-Benz 450 SLC: "These people have a styling department, but I can't imagine what they do there all day. They suffer from sclerosis."

☆☆☆☆

On the Oldsmobile Toronado: "The scale is too big. When you see it in Manhattan, it looks like a tank."

☆☆☆☆

On Giorgetto Giugiaro: "All his cars look like they're cut out of cardboard and folded together. You want to stick Tab A into Slot B."

☆☆☆☆

On the first Camaro: "It wasn't worth a damn. There were too many people involved."

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On the Mercedes 280E: "They took a grille that's a classic, superb shape, and they made it into a barrel vault. Awful."

☆☆☆☆

On the sartorial splendor of a GM vice-president: "Hell, my wife has better looking linoleum on her kitchen floor than you've got in that suit."

☆☆☆☆

On the Porsche 924: "This isn't progress, this is just spinning around."

On the Porsche 911: "No Porsche was ever good looking. It's a toad. I've always said that what Porsche needed was a damn good designer. The Germans have a word for it . . . it looks like a loaf of bread."

☆☆☆☆

On 5-mph safety bumpers: "I'm sick of these ugly, dirty black bumpers. I call it the asphalt stage . . . dirty tennis shoes."

☆☆☆☆

On the Cadillac Seville: "People always say, 'You copied Mercedes.' Never. I copied Rolls-Royce. My father always said, 'If you're going to steal, rob a bank, not a grocery store.'"

☆☆☆☆

On small cars: "The smaller a car is, the tougher it is. Designing a small car is like tailoring a dwarf."

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On Citroën styling: "It looks like a French pastry chef worked on it."

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On Rolls-Royce: "David Plaistow should send his paint men to Harrah's and use some of those beautiful 1920 Rolls-Royce colors. And the wheels . . . those wheel discs would go on a Chevrolet truck."

☆☆☆☆

On Bill Mitchell: "My life has been dedicated to the pursuit of the beautiful."

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