Special Corvette Issue

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Next Collectible:
The Magic of AMG Performance

The Legendary Concepts of a Legendary Designer

Bill Mitchell's



1959 Stingray Special Racer

By Gary Witzenburg



Concept Cars

apper Californian Harley Earl moved to Detroit in 1927 to create General Motors' Art and Colour Section and transformed the automobile from a piece of functional engineering

into a work of fashionable art. Under his leadership, GM cars – with a different look and image for each division – led American mass-produced auto design through the '30s, '40s and postwar '50s.

New Yorker William L. "Bill" Mitchell, smaller in stature but not in talent or confidence, joined Earl in 1935 and a year later was leading GM's Cadillac studio. His ground-breaking 1938 Cadillac 60 Special, 1941 Cadillac and airplane-finned postwar 1948 Cadillac designs, were bold trendsetters revered today by historians and collectors alike. No surprise that the headstrong, hard-drinking Mitchell was anointed Earl's heir and, in December 1958, replaced him as GM's second styling vice president. "He let me know five years ahead that I was going to get his job," Mitchell told historian David Crippen in a 1985 interview, as part of the Benson Ford Research Center "Automotive Design Oral History" at the Dearborn, Mich. Henry Ford Museum.

Flamboyant, gregarious, and unforgettable, Bill Mitchell was born to be an automotive stylist. "I never drew a car sitting still," he liked to say. "Every car I've ever drawn, I drew as if it were in motion." During his 19-year reign, GM was unquestionably the industry leader in automo-

tive styling; by 1965, 62 percent of the cars and trucks sold in America were penned by GM designers. His words may well have been prophetic. Said Mitchell, "I don't believe in surveys and asking people what they want. Good taste comes from experience. Good design sells. You lead when you believe in yourself."

Many of his best and most significant concepts were born in his secret "Studio X" hidden deep within the basement of the Styling building at GM's Warren, Mich., Technical Center, where access was usually limited to one hand-picked designer, one engineer and one sculptor. Throughout his years as styling VP, he liked to rotate his favorite designers, sculptors and engineers through Studio X, where they could explore his visions unmolested by corporate executives, divisional general managers and even other designers who would want to "help."

1959 Stingray Special Racer

Mitchell *loved* Corvettes, so it's fitting that his first secret-studio car – and perhaps the most historically significant – was his 1959 Corvette Sting Ray racer. When this project was conceived, all domestic makers had agreed to a U.S. government ban on factory sponsored racing as a PR gesture to promote highway safety. But Chevrolet, under General Manager Ed Cole, had not yet complied. "Chevrolet was racing," Mitchell told Crippen in that 1985 interview. "[GM President Jack] Gordon was on the National Safety Council, so it didn't look good for GM to still be in racing. After the Sebring [Florida] race, Gordon said, 'Stop it!'

Bill Mitchell's

"I knew they had three or four chassis that [Corvette Chief Engineer] Duntov had built. So I went to Cole and said, 'Get me one of those.' He said, 'Well, I'll sell it to you for \$500.' It was worth \$500,000 – tubular frame, de Dion suspension, inboard brakes, everything! And I went down in the hammer room and designed this Corvette Stingray in clay. Nobody in the corporation knew about it."

According to the excellent Mike Lamm/Dave Holls book, *A Century of Automotive Style*, junior designers Peter Brock and Chuck Pohlman won an internal sketch competition to design its body. Pohlman and Corvette Lead Designer Larry Shinoda did the clay model, then a fiberglass roadster body, and mated that to the racing chassis.

As Lamm and Holls describe it, "The resulting roadster didn't look like any other sports car in the world. The Sting Ray's fiberglass body had a sharp break line running all the way around the perimeter and fender peaks over all four wheels, an open cockpit, a faired-in headrest, a tiny single windshield and a sharp nose on the low hood."

He ran just one race with it before Mitchell was busted. During the next high-level Engineering Policy Committee meeting, he related to Crippen, that Gordon made a point of saying, "I thought everybody knew we were out of racing." After the meeting, Mitchell asked him, 'Jack, were you talking about me?' He said, 'You're damned right I was.' I said, 'Do I have to quit?' He said, 'You've got to quit right now!' And, it just made me feel terrible."

So Mitchell wrote him a letter. "I got my job from racing," he wrote. "That's what I did." Then, the next time Gordon visited Styling, Mitchell took him to see the Sting Ray and asked him, "Jack, did you get my letter?" He said, 'I sure as hell did, and you're a good salesman. You can go ahead. Keep it off the property, and spend your own money."

He did, and in 1960 – driven primarily by Chicago dentist Dr. Dick Thompson – it won the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) C-Modified class championship. More importantly, it introduced the folded-crease styling that would become a trademark of Mitchell's 1960s designs and marked the beginning of the path to the revolutionary 1963 Corvette Stingray. "When it came time to face-lift the Corvette," he told Crippen, "I took the lines right off that car."

1961 Corvette Mako Shark

1961 Corvette Mako Shark

While deep-sea fishing on vacation in Bimini, Mitchell caught a Mako shark. He had it mounted for his office and challenged Shinoda and Studio X to create a shark-inspired Corvette concept painted to match its intriguing dark-fading-to-light gradient color scheme. They tried it twice but could not satisfy him. On their third try, (as legend has it) they took what could have been a careerending risk: they stole the mounted shark from his office and painted it to match the car! Mitchell liked it, and if he ever found out, he never let on.

Mitchell's concept cars often evolved over several iterations, and his original XP-755 "Shark" coupe carried over the "double-bubble" top and rear-view periscope from an earlier Harley Earl XP-700 concept Corvette, and its rear deck sported twin flip-up brake lights. The later roadster version renamed "Mako Shark" added a protective bar over a grille-mounted emblem at the tip of its nose and thermostatically controlled air-extraction vents on the hood.

Now powered by a rare race-tuned 427 ZL1 aluminum V8 with four-into-one side pipes, the Mako Shark shakes a building when it's started inside. It is the embodiment of Mitchell: loud, flamboyant and unforgettable.

1969 Corvette Manta Ray

A flashier-still Mako Shark II concept debuted in 1965 as an early preview of the flamboyant-fendered, Coke-bottlewaisted next-generation Corvette that would reach production for 1968. It continued the shark-like paint scheme with a dramatically pointed nose, a fastback roof with a louvered rear window, a power-deployed rear spoiler, serious side exhausts, black-out chrome and "Mark IV 396" lettering on its vented, power-domed hood. As more advanced big-block V8s became available, it was fitted with a 427 and later an aluminum-block ZL1.

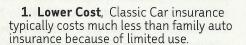
The Mako Shark II was redesigned for 1969 as the Manta Ray. Still wearing a paint scheme similar to the original Shark's, it grew a protective composite lip around its grille and a front spoiler below it, sported more production-realistic side pipes and lost its louvered rear window in favor of a tunneled design leading to a long, tapered, energy absorbing rear end with four round tail lamps. Among its more interesting features were twin deck-mounted doors that popped up during hard braking to become reflective auxiliary brake lights. The Manta Ray soon became one of Mitchell's favorites for his own personal transportation.





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Bill Mitchell's Concept Cars



Chevrolet Corvair Monza GT and SS

Chevrolet's air-cooled, rear-engine Corvair reached production for 1960 as GM's answer to the growing popularity of small, inexpensive imports, including the similarly laid-out Volkswagen Beetle. Mitchell was excited by the design possibilities offered by the Corvair's component set, with no big lump of an engine or bulky radiator up front. It enabled the designer's dream of very low, sleek, aerodynamic front ends.

To explore the possibilities of Corvair-based sports cars, he created a gorgeous pair of concepts named for Italy's famed Monza racing circuit. The silver Monza GT coupe's unique features included rectangular concealed headlamps and a one-piece canopy that pivoted upward for access to its matching silver interior. The red Monza SS roadster's five-inch-high windscreen swept around its cockpit, and its rear Targa wing incorporated a built-in roll bar. Developed in 1962, both slippery shapes reflected substantial wind-tunnel testing.

Among other innovations, these concepts pioneered the tall, voluptuous fenders that made the 1968 Corvette such a stand-out design. And they offered the potential of a future expansion of the Corvair line to include a low-cost alternative to the Corvette. "I wanted [something] more exotic," Mitchell told Crippen, "so I built the one where the hatch came up...and it's still a beautiful car, but it was heavy. Then I built the open job. [GM] just couldn't see putting that out...but it went around to shows everywhere."

Chevrolet Astro 1, Astro II and Astro III

Mitchell's breath-taking 1967 Astro I styling study enabled his designers to explore the boundaries between beauty and low-drag forms. At less than three feet high, it was the lowest concept model ever created by GM Design, so low that passengers had to use elevator seats to get in and out. A touch of a flush release pad caused the canopy to rise electrically. Once inside, occupants were lowered to a reclining position with another button.



By contrast, the following year's Astro II, a collaboration between GM Design and GM Research, was a much more production-practical sports car. One of an extended series of mid-engine concepts created both by Mitchell and by Corvette Chief Engineer Zora Arkus Duntov, it was designed with input from Larry Shinoda with future Corvettes in mind.

The radical 1969 Astro III is a two-passenger experimental car resembling an executive jet aircraft, even down to its "tricycle" wheel arrangement...though it actually has four wheels, with the front pair placed close together under its nose. Powered by a Model 250-C18 gas turbine engine, it was envisioned as a high-performance vehicle suited for future restricted access or system-controlled highways. A power canopy moves forward and upward for entry, and rear vision is provided by closed-circuit TV with a screen on the center console.

Buick Riviera Silver Arrow I and Silver Arrow III

Buick's iconic 1963 Riviera luxury sport coupe actually began as a Mitchell concept attempting to marry the highend sporting character of a Ferrari to the shear-edged luxury look of a Rolls-Royce. He thought of it as a Cadillac, maybe a rebirth of the division's former junior-series LaSalle. But Cadillac turned it down, so he offered it to GM's other divisions. Buick eventually won the competition, and it evolved almost intact into the first production Riviera.

Bill Mitchell's Concept Cars



Mitchell loved the leading-edge '63 Riv so much that as soon as its production began, he grabbed one fresh off the assembly line and had it converted into a tarted-up show vehicle, which he enjoyed driving regularly. Among other modifications, its roof was lowered more than two inches and its special interior was trimmed in silver leather.

Silver Arrow III, Mitchell's third chopped and stretched Riviera showpiece, was based on the new-for-1971 third-generation "Boat-tail" Riv, and it marked the beginning of his 1970s fascination with modern interpretations of classic prewar proportions. Beyond the lowered roof, its design features included high-level warning lights doubling as secondary turn

signals, redesigned bumpers and quarter windows, a plush silver leather interior and real wire wheels.

These 10 memorable Mitchell concepts, including the three Studio-X-born concept Corvettes, will be displayed in a Bill Mitchell Concepts class at the Aug. 3, 2008 Meadow Brook Concours d'Elegance in Rochester Hills, Mich. It will be one of four classes honoring General Motors' 100th anniversary. Other notable classes will include 1930s V16s, Bentley Eight Liters and Auburn/Cords/Duesenbergs, American Classics, Model Ts, Roaring Twenties, brass, sports, muscle and limited-production cars and vintage motorcycles with sidecars.

