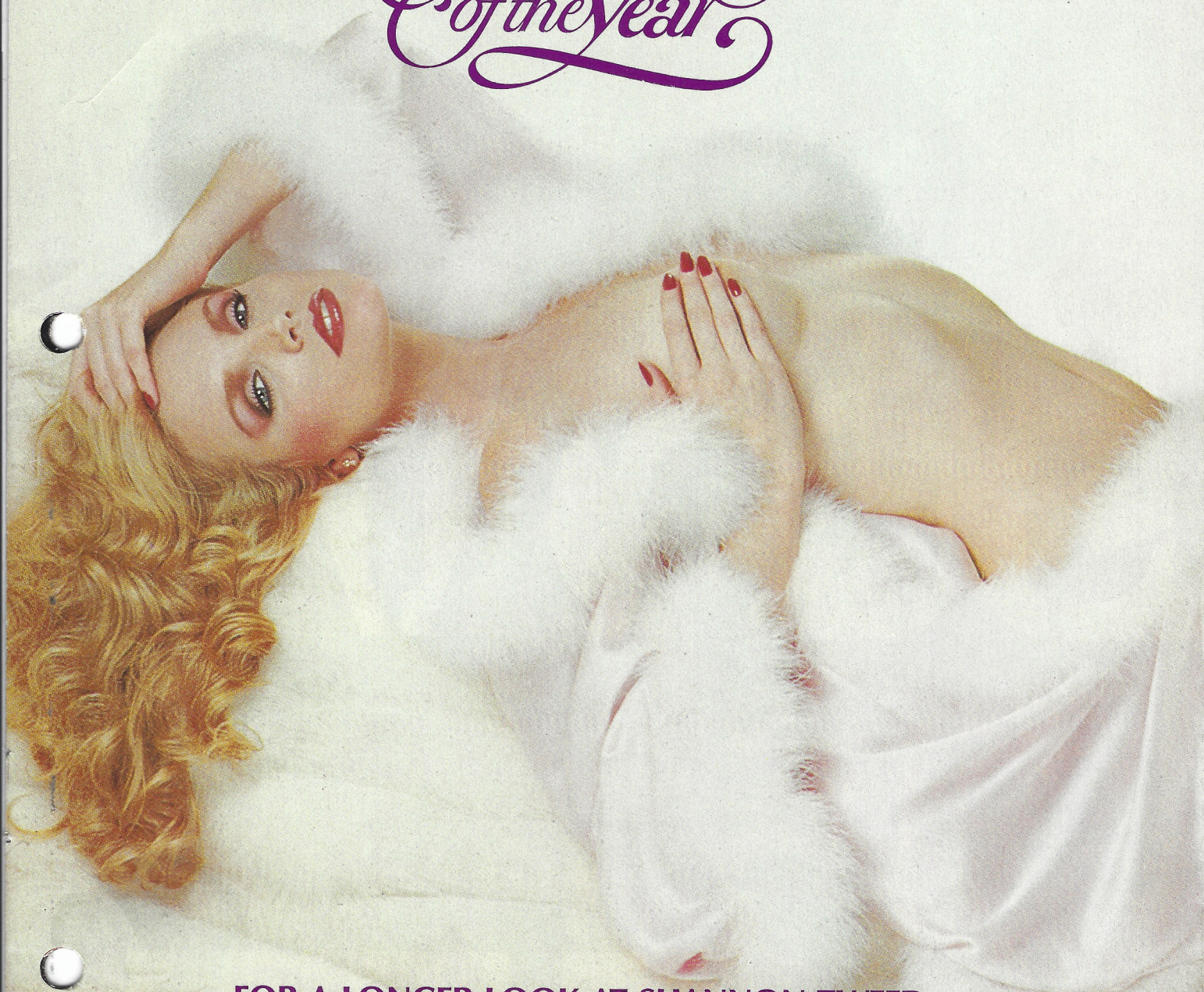


PLAYBOY

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THEN TURN TO HER FABULOUS PICTORIAL INSIDE

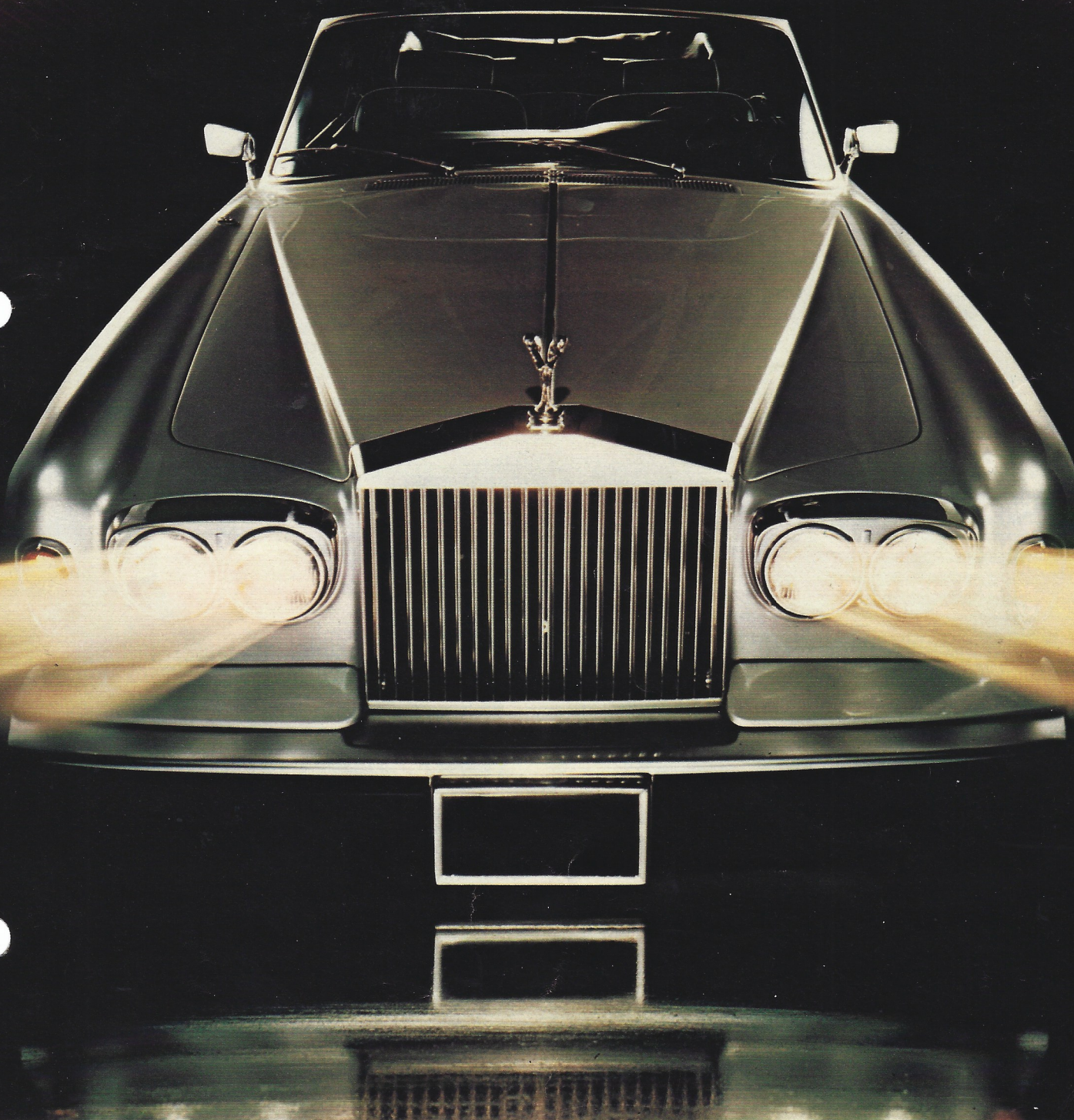
article **By GARY WITZENBURG**

CONVERTIBLES were the stuff of dreams, proclaiming freedom, independence and a devil-may-care sort of spirit. Who cared that they also shook, rattled and leaked? Come the first sunny weekend in May, you and your ragtop were king of the road.
(text continued on page 158)

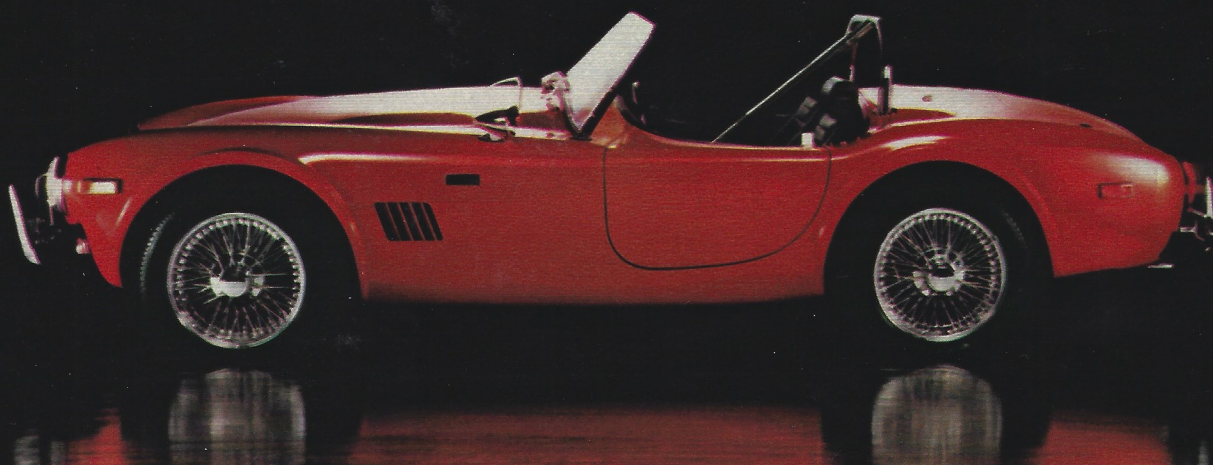
Return of the Ragtop

Rolls-Royce Corniche: At \$162,500, the world's most expensive ragtop takes five months to hand build. Inside, the leatherlike Everflex top is lined with west-of-England wool cloth to hide the struts and the lifting mechanism. For an additional \$2332, Rolls will even install lockable decanter compartments in the convertible's front doors.

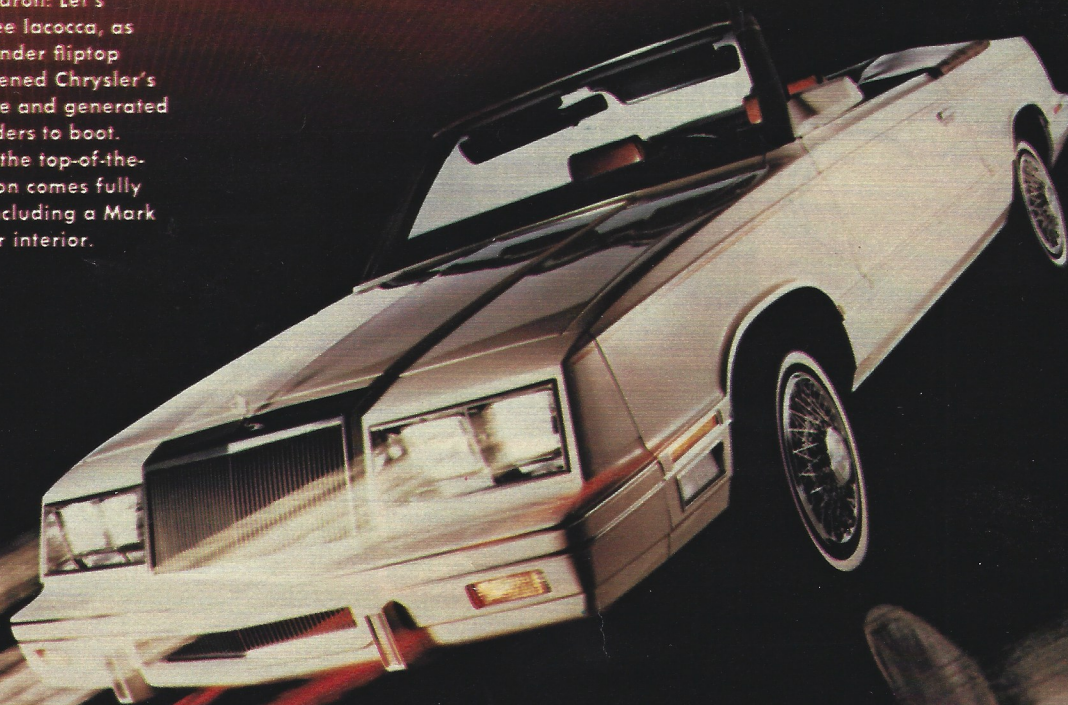
*against all odds, the convertible is back—
better than ever—and “let’s put the top down” is once again
the call of the open road*



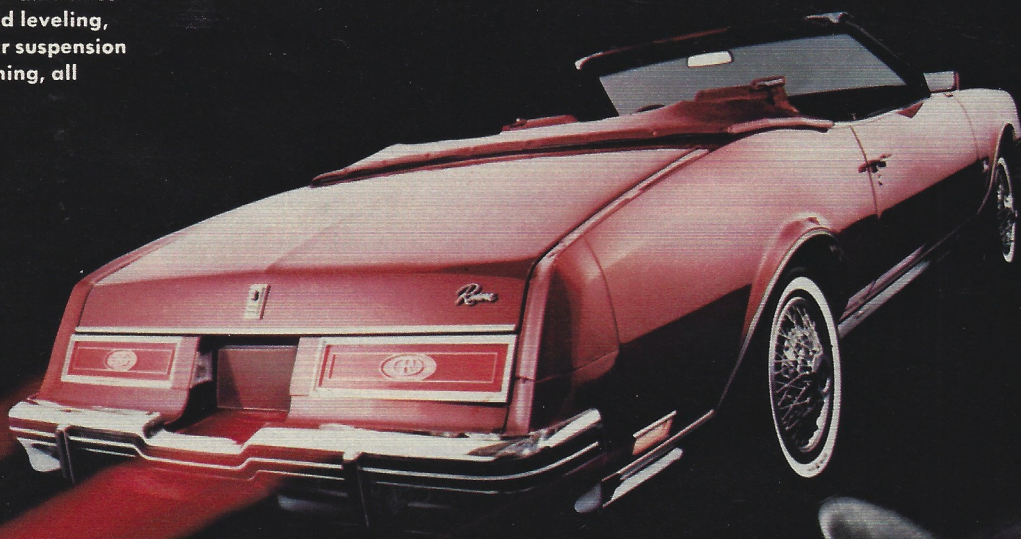
Aurora GRX: As mean and sexy as the original Cobra, the Canadian-built Aurora GRX boasts a 5.0-liter Ford V8 engine coupled with a four-speed gearbox, plus a Connolly leather interior and a removable chrome roll bar. At \$36,000, you've got yourself instant automotive status.



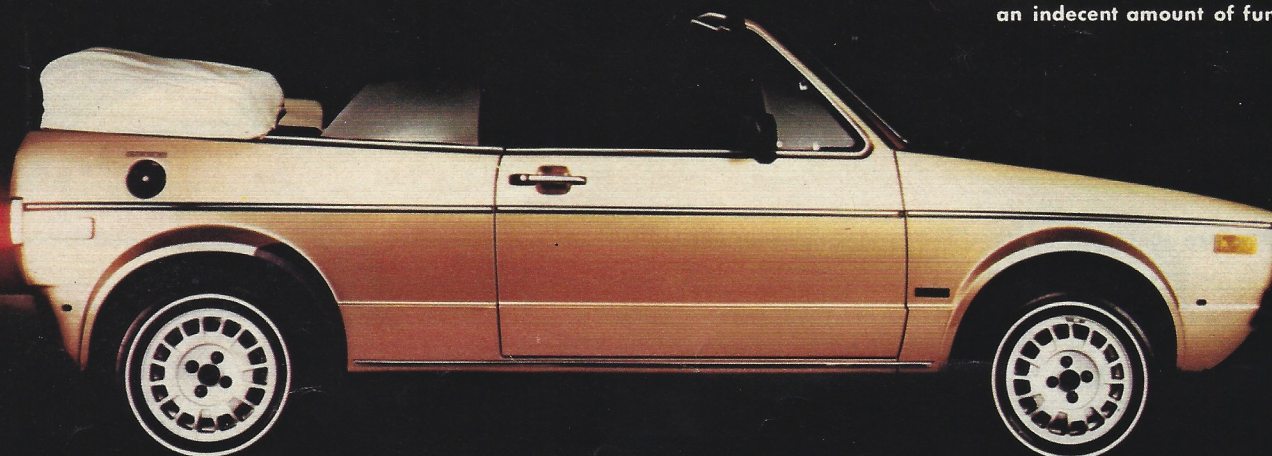
Chrysler LeBaron: Let's hear it for Lee Iacocca, as this four-cylinder flip-top has rebrightened Chrysler's fading image and generated a blitz of orders to boot. At \$14,000, the top-of-the-line Medallion comes fully equipped, including a Mark Cross leather interior.



Buick Riviera: General Motors' first convertible since the 1976 Eldorado boasts a variety of engine choices from 2.1-liter V6 to a 5.0-liter V8, plus such amenities as automatic load leveling, independent rear suspension and air conditioning, all for \$24,000.



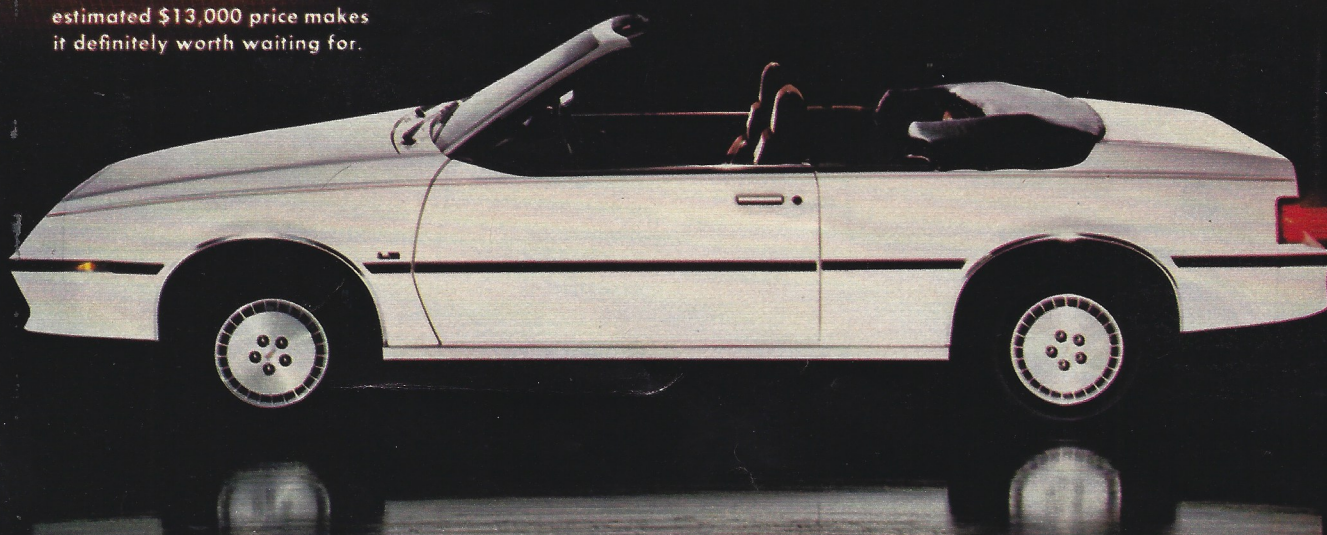
Volkswagen Rabbit: Who else but VW would produce the world's most inexpensive four-seat convertible? For \$10,600, you get a car that's powered by a transverse-mounted 1.7-liter fuel-injected overhead-cam four, has a super-snug triple-layered top and offers an indecent amount of fun.



Fiat Spider Turbo: Yep, they've gone and coupled a turbo with the basic Spider, upping the horsepower by 18 percent, lowering the 0-to-60 time to about nine seconds. If that's not seductive enough, remember that the price for this raspy little runner is only \$15,000.

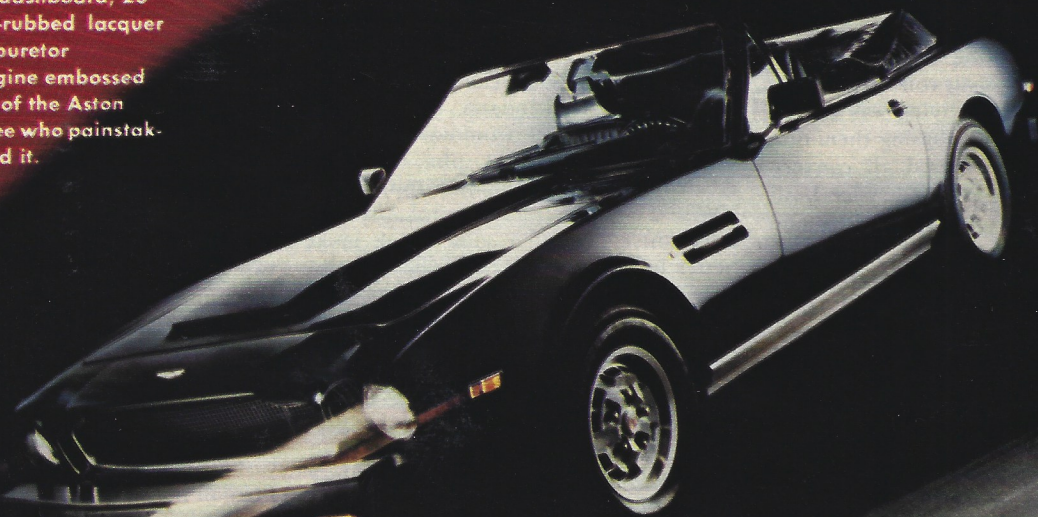


Pontiac J2000: Still in prototype form, this nifty convertible may reach the streets early next year, likely to be powered by a 1.8 Brazilian-built four-cylinder coupled with a five-speed or automatic transmission. The estimated \$13,000 price makes it definitely worth waiting for.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD IZUI

Aston Martin Volante: You gets what you pays for in this \$115,000 machine—a varnished-walnut dashboard, 23 coats of hand-rubbed lacquer and a four-carburetor 5.4-liter V8 engine embossed with the name of the Aston Martin employee who painstakingly assembled it.



Lancia Zagato: Parent company Fiat's peppy little \$15,000 stepchild is powered by the same 2.0-liter double-overhead-cam four banger that's in the Spider. Lancia's exotic body style, however, is unique and features a removable Targa panel combined with a fold-down rear-roof section.



and you continued to rule all the way through late October, when you finally had to put the cap on your automotive fun for the winter. Then came the social-conscious Seventies. Domestic car manufacturers, anticipating a law against softtops and seeing their convertible sales wither, decided lidless living was a thing of the past and began phasing them out.

American Motors ceased all convertible production in 1969. Chrysler built its last ones (Plymouth Barracudas and Dodge Challengers) in 1971. Ford's sole remaining ragtops were Mustangs and Cougars, and those were retired when both cars were redesigned for 1974. Only G.M.'s largest and most expensive lines and the Corvette sports car remained available with retractable tops, and all but Cadillac's Eldorado were dropped for 1976. As the last factory-built American convertible, the gargantuan, decadent Eldorado enjoyed brief celebrity status that year. Then it, too, was gone.

Our beloved American convertible had vanished while we were caught up in the just crusades of cleaner air, safety and fuel economy. But those who grew up with convertibles are older and long to recapture happy symbols of their youth. Many who couldn't afford one in the past now have both the bucks and the urge to discover what they missed. And there's a growing trend toward unique and exclusive automobiles, in general, as statements of individuality. In other words, the American public's enthusiasm for open-air motoring has blossomed anew, and no number of sun roofs, T tops and Targas will sufficiently scratch this reborn convertible itch.

For our PLAYBOY softtop showcase, we have chosen five imported convertibles now on the U.S. market (two English, two Italian and one German), a pair of new-generation domestics, another domestic that's still a gleam in its prospective maker's eye and one delectable Canadian-built replicar. Prices range from \$10,600 to \$162,500, so there's something for all.

VOLKSWAGEN RABBIT CONVERTIBLE

Spiritual successor to the late, lamented Beetle convertible, Volkswagen's ragtop Rabbit is as modern in concept and mechanics as its predecessor was archaic. Where the Beetle was pushed from behind by a four-cylinder sewing machine of an engine, the Rabbit is pulled from in front by a high-tech fuel-injected overhead-cam four, mounted transversely for space efficiency. And unlike VW's Stateside-made Rabbit models, the convertible is custom-assembled in West Germany.

Its snug three-layer nylon-and-vinyl top contains an inch of insulated pad-

ding and can be raised or lowered by one person in about 60 seconds. The rear window is glass, not plastic, and contains wires for electric defogging.

For safety, there's a built-in roll bar that also adds structural stiffness to the body and provides channels for the tight-fitting side windows. Unfortunately, the rear quarter windows roll down only halfway, and that, plus the lump created by the folded-down top, makes VW's Teutonic Rabbit probably the only convertible that some think looks better buttoned up. At \$10,600, it's also today's most affordable four-seat convertible.

PONTIAC J2000 CONVERTIBLE

This is a car that may or may not be built. It should be. Pontiac had a prototype constructed and displayed it at an auto show in Florida last winter before whooshing it back to Detroit and out of sight—for evaluation, modifications and some further development. It was not shown in January at the Detroit Auto Show, and it may not be on public view again for some time. (Luckily, Pontiac did let us photograph the prototype before it dropped out of sight.)

If it does reach production, we hope that the proposed J2000 convertible will come with five-speed (or automatic) transmission bolted to the newly available Brazilian-built overhead-cam 1.8-liter four, a combination that gives the sort of snappy performance and flexibility that sporty-car buyers rightly expect. Certainly, the J2000 looks well dressed in convertible clothes, with its swoopy, Firebirdlike nose, slightly wedgy aerodynamic profile and high rear deck set off by blacked-out wrap-around ribbed tail lamps. Top up or down, it's a handsome piece from any angle. And with well-equipped J-cars going for \$9000 to \$10,000, a custom-converted soft-top version should start around \$13,000.

CHRYSLER LE BARON CONVERTIBLE

Unlike Pontiac, Chrysler hasn't been the slightest bit shy about promoting its new floptop LeBaron and Dodge 400. The standard LeBaron and 400 convertibles come with Chrysler's 2.2-liter four-cylinder engine, console-shift automatic transmission and a power-operated top. The top-line LeBaron Medallion is marketed on a one-price, fully equipped basis, the only buyer choices being color (white or mahogany brown), wheel design (fake wire or styled aluminum), sound system (electronic stereo with seek-and-scan or Dolby cassette), saddle-leather Mark Cross designer interior, reclining front bucket seats, power windows, door locks and trunk release, halogen head lamps, speed control and more.

The loaded LeBaron Medallion goes

for about \$14,000; the regular LeBaron and 400, for about \$2000 less, depending on optional equipment.

BUICK RIVIERA CONVERTIBLE

Like Chrysler, Buick is displaying a stunning prototype Riviera convertible at auto shows around the country, and it should have the first production examples in selected dealers' hands by now. Like Chrysler's top-of-the-line LeBaron Medallion, they will be marketed fully equipped, with few options and only two color choices (white and maple). But, unlike LeBarons, the Buick convertibles will have power-operated, fully retractable rear quarter windows, so they'll look as good with the top up as with it down. With loaded Rivieras going for \$18,000 and the conversion cost estimated at \$6000, look for a sticker price in the \$24,000 range.

AURORA GRX

The Shelby/Ford Cobra was a brute of a car. Created by Texan ace racer Carroll Shelby from a light and lovely English A.C. sports car and an ass-kickin' Ford V8 engine, it was the fastest machine you could buy—faster than most people could safely drive.

The original 289 Cobra would do 0 to 60 in less than six seconds, 0 to 100 in 13 seconds and an honest 1 flat-out, despite its graceful but decidedly unaerodynamic body shape. The awesome 427 Cobra (with a brave, skilled and strong driver at the wheel) could do 0 to 100 in nine seconds and back down to 0 in another five, all day long! Cobras have become so legendary that their prices as collectibles have gone out of sight, and few of their lucky owners are looking to sell, anyway. Hence, the Cobra replicar.

A number of firms have built Cobra clones in recent years, some as kits, some as complete cars; some are good and some, pretty awful. Most are copies of the less pretty, more brutal, wider-mouthed 427, and most feature modern Ford V8s on Ford-based mechanicals, plus something more in the comfort-and-convenience department than the original Cobra boasted.

But perhaps the best Cobra copy purchasable as a complete car is the Aurora GRX, from Aurora Cars of Richmond Hill, Ontario, near Toronto. Auroras have a tubular-steel frame and chassis and a handlaid fiberglass body that's a near-perfect copy of the beautiful 289 Cobra. There are no used or recycled parts (most come directly from Ford) and the finished car carries both Ford's and Aurora's warranty for 12 months or 12,000 miles. It meets all U.S. safety

(continued on page 228)

Return of the Ragtop (continued from page 158)

"The regular Fiat Spider starts at \$12,000; the pulse-quickenning Turbo seems a bargain at \$15,000."

and emissions standards, and the company has recently joined the U.S./Canada Auto Pact trade agreement as Canada's only new-car manufacturer. The output goal is 125 cars per year.

While the Aurora GRX may not accelerate like the original Cobra, it's certainly fast enough by today's standards to bulge your eyes, slacken your jaw and attract every traffic cop for miles around. A fuel-injected version of Ford's high-performance 5.0-liter Mustang GT engine, coupled with a four-speed Ford gearbox, rockets the little 2150-pound roadster to 60 mph in less than seven seconds and to 100 in another nine or so, topping out around 130. The fat Michelin TRX tires, rack-and-pinion steering and racerlike tubular-arm, coil-over-shock suspension with sway bars front and rear give more cornering power than most will care to use; and big 11-inch disc brakes at all corners suck the car to a stop mighty quick.

A limited-slip differential, handsewn Connolly leather interior, turbine-style aluminum wheels, a folding softtop and tonneau cover, a removable chrome roll bar and a heater are standard for the \$36,000 base price. Air conditioning, automatic transmission, a removable fiberglass hardtop, wire wheels, quartz-light package and a Blaupunkt AM/FM stereo cassette radio are optional. If you want one of today's most exciting sports cars and don't mind talking about it with every pump jockey, cop and car enthusiast you encounter, the Aurora GRX is definitely for you. For more information, write to Aurora GRX, 88 Circular Street, Saratoga Springs, New York 12866. Low profile it's not.

FIAT SPIDER TURBO

Founded in 1899, Fiat (*Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino*) is the General Motors of Italy, producing nearly 2,000,000 vehicles a year of all types and sizes for distribution throughout Europe, the U.S. and other parts of the world. Although its heritage includes high-performance GTs and opulent luxury cars, it is best known in America for a long line of gracefully styled, reasonably priced roadsters named Spider.

Latest in this series is the lovely Pininfarina-designed 2000 Spider. This delightful two-seater has been around for more than 15 years, yet its timeless shape still looks good. Its suspension, though equally antique, still gives the kind of road-holding and driving fun

expected of an Italian sports car; the traditional Fiat double-overhead-cam 2.0-liter four, fuel-injected in 1980, still pumps 102 *con brio* horsepower through the standard five-speed and zappy Italian-sports-car noises out the tail pipe. Despite the slightly long-armed, short-legged Italianesque driving position, there's plenty of comfort and convenience in the cockpit, and Fiat's manual convertible top may be the world's easiest to operate. Power four-wheel disc brakes with a rear pressure compensator, front air dam, tinted glass, quartz clock and intermittent wipers are standard; options include automatic transmission, power windows, alloy wheels, leather interior and a stereo radio, with or without cassette tape deck.

But the best news in years for open-sports-car lovers was Fiat North America's inspired decision to fit a few 1981 Spiders with small, high-speed turbochargers, boosting horsepower 18 percent to 120 and turning the machine into a Corvettelike stormer without much effect on its fuel economy. The regular Spider starts around \$12,000, while the pulse-quickenning Turbo, the most exciting Italian sports car this side of a Ferrari, seems a bargain at \$15,000.

LANCIA ZAGATO

Also imported by Fiat North America is the Lancia line of Italian sporting cars, the sole U.S.-market representative of which is currently the handsome Zagato convertible. (Actually, Lancia is owned by the Fiat parent company, having been bought out in 1969, but not before establishing a long and proud history as a maker of fine automobiles since 1906.)

What makes the Zagato unique is its combination of removable Targa roof panel, a central B pillar with integral roll bar and the soft, fold-down rear roof section that qualifies it as a true convertible. Power is supplied by the same fuel-injected, double-overhead-cam 2.0-liter four that moves the Fiat Spider, driving the front wheels through a standard five-speed transaxle. Performance is more than adequate, and—thanks to a fully independent strut-type suspension, rack-and-pinion steering and power four-wheel disc brakes—the Zagato's handling and braking capabilities are nothing short of outstanding. It's a beautiful car to look at standing still, and it's equally exhilarating at speed from behind the wheel.

As the only Lancia currently imported

here, the Zagato has benefited in the past couple of years from a great deal of attention aimed at making it a more viable U.S.-market entry. The interior and the instrument panel have received a welcome redesign; more standard and optional features (the latter including air conditioning, power windows, leather interior and metallic paint) have been incorporated; and quality control has been vastly improved. A new three-year rust warranty guarantees against premature corrosion, and an optional two-year or 24,000-mile power-train warranty can be tacked onto the standard 12/12 arrangement. You can be the first Zagato owner on your block for about \$15,000.

ASTON MARTIN VOLANTE

Drive your \$115,000 Aston Martin Volante convertible up to the club, and people will know it's something special—but they won't know *how* special, and they won't trample one another to get a look at it. That's OK with Aston Martin, as Volantes, a company spokesman said, are primarily bought by relatively young entrepreneurs "who own their own businesses and want to give themselves a treat but don't want to attract much attention."

The Volante's styling is handsome but conservative and a bit dated. Except for the 23 coats of hand-rubbed lacquer applied to the hand-formed aluminum body, the money is mostly inside—handsewn Connolly leather, a mirror-matched burled-walnut dashboard, leather-bound Wilton wool carpets, etc.—and underneath the hood. Each four-carburetor, four-overhead-cam, aluminum 5.4-liter V8 engine is hand-assembled by one of only four men qualified to do it and is identified by a brass plaque bearing his name. Each engine piston is weighed on a scale to ensure uniformity and perfect balance. In all, it takes some 150 craftsmen about four months to complete one Aston Martin.

As expected, almost every convenience you can think of is standard equipment—except speed control, which Aston Martin feels is important only to people who don't enjoy driving. And since it intends to import only 45 Volantes to the U.S. this year, it can well afford to sell only to those who do.

ROLLS-ROYCE CORNICHE CONVERTIBLE

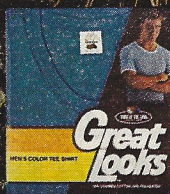
At \$162,500, the Corniche is the world's most expensive convertible.

What sets the R-R ragtop apart from any other in the world? For starters, while the company's megabuck sedans take three to four *months* to build, the Corniche convertible, assembled by the company's own Mulliner-Park Ward coachworks in London, takes *five*. Its body panels are hand-formed for the sort of visual "flow" down the sides that machine-stamped metal can't match. One man spends an entire week fitting

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the top, carefully avoiding what R-R calls the "starved-cow look"—framework ribs disturbing the cloth top's smooth contour. The top itself is crafted from a man-made material called Everflex, which can be dyed any color and will never fade from sunlight. Inside, every inch of the top's frame and mechanism is covered by a thick, soft head liner made of west-of-England wool cloth.

The raising and lowering of the power top are both silent and supereasy: There are just two latches over the windshield and a button between the seats, which (for obvious reasons) won't operate when the car is moving. As an added touch (\$2332 extra) for those who entertain on the go, a lockable compartment for decanter and glasses can be built into either door.

Smoothness and quiet are also what a Rolls-Royce is all about, and the convertible is no exception. The top and the windows fit so snugly that all you hear at speed is an occasional lump-lump from the tires over bumps and tar strips. The speedometer and the gear change are electronic, because mechanical cables and linkages provide paths for noise to leak inside. And you certainly won't hear the hand-assembled aluminum 6.8-liter V8 engine, each one of which is bench-tested for eight hours by a stethoscoped technician listening for noises.

Of course, if the Rolls-Royce Corniche convertible seems a bit ostentatious for your down-home lifestyle, there's the Bentley Corniche convertible. Identical, except for the grille, it's a mere \$161,950.

It's been said that everything runs in cycles. The convertible was all but dead, and now it's coming back. First kit cars and replicars; then custom conversions of everything from Hondas to Mercedes; and now a return of factory-produced and authorized American convertibles. There are others besides the nine featured here: Mercedes-Benz's 380SL, Alfa Romeo's Spider Veloce and Ford's newly revived floptop Mustang. And there are more to come: Porsche 911 and Jaguar XJ-S roadsters; probably a convertible version of Fiat's Rabbit-rival Strada; Chevrolet's Cavalier and perhaps an eventual softtop available on the all-new 1983 Corvette.

Whether you opt for a \$10,600 Rabbit or a \$162,500 Rolls-Royce, a convertible is more than just a means of transportation. It says freedom, independence and driving fun; and driving fun is something there's been too little of in recent years. Pick a gorgeous day, drop the top, belt your favorite lady in beside you, let your hair blow free and watch your troubles drift with the breeze out the back. It's a feeling that can't be duplicated any other way. Go for it!

