



PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL FANT

Fiat 128SL

It is neither as plush nor as voluptuous as Sophia Loren, but it is every bit as Italian. And for those who still can remember the Mini-Cooper, awake from your sleep to a handling dream that will be nothing short of *deja vu*.

Report by Gary Witzenburg

Fiat 128SL

Deep in our heart of hearts, we all know that Mr. Ferrari does *not* drive a Fiat. But if he did, it would be a 128SL.

Picture a modern, refined, attractive,

continent. Its design wisely includes a very short piston stroke which should help it survive long exposures to high rpm operation. In short, the 128 is Fiat's first production front-wheel drive car, and it's probably the best Fiat ever. It has helped to make Fiat the largest selling marque in Europe.

of the energy in a frontal crash. (This location makes the engine space a little busy, but saves room in the trunk—which is cavernous for a car only 159½" long.)

Inside and out, the car is a visual delight. The design was done by Fiat's own styling center with the aid of both

pressure—disappointing for a car of such a sporting nature. The upholstery is leather-like vinyl, and the lovely seats adjust to any angle with a turn of a crank-wheel at your side. There is ample head and shoulder room and enough seat adjustment to provide nearly anyone with a straight-arm driving



comfortable, civilized and practical Mini Cooper and you'll get the idea. The 128SL is not as plush or voluptuous as Sophia Loren, but it's just as Italian. It doesn't have a 200mph name like Espada or Bora, but it's just as much a driver's car—at a price nearly any driver can afford. It's not equipped with an exotic midship V12, and it's certainly not a tiger at the stoplight as delivered, but it can be modified with a minimum of fuss and expense to put out roughly 3 times its production horsepower at the drive wheels. In stock trim, you can cruise absolutely flat out all day long (that's legal in Nevada), thrash it through the mountains like Nuvolari on the Targa Florio, and still it gets more than 24mpg. Most important, you'll love every minute of it.

The 128SL is the successor to the 850 Coupe, just as the X1/9 will succeed the 850 Spyder. But it's as different from the docile 850 as the Mini was from the Morris Minor. Middle-aged businessmen bought 850 coupes for their teenage daughters because 850s were cheap, didn't go very fast and hardly used any gas at all. They were air-cooled, rear engine, rear drive econoboxes. Their styling was cute and crisp, but they bore an unfortunate resemblance to VW Type 3s. Worst of all, they often suffered from that incurable malady which attacks the nuts and bolts of Italian cars, soon spreads to their owners, and causes both to deteriorate rapidly while still in their youth.

The 128 series (2-door, 4-door, wagon) was introduced in Europe 4 years ago and has had great success there. The model has a new 1116cc engine which has been called one of the best small engines available on the Con-

The new SL coupe is based on the 128 sedan, but it's not just a sporty body plopped onto the sedan chassis. The engine has been enlarged to 1290cc and the wheelbase shortened almost 9" to improve the handling. As a result, the rear seat room has been reduced to the point where it's no longer a comfortable 4-seater, but that seems a small price to pay for the kind of cornering performance Fiat has achieved with the car.

The sohc engine is front-mounted transversely—in Mini fashion—with the 4-speed transaxle alongside. The radiator is offset to the left with an electric fan to cool it when the car is at rest. The spare is mounted in the engine compartment so that it will absorb some

computer and wind tunnel. In front, the little car has the grace of a much bigger and costlier machine, a little like the pre-bumper-law 124 coupe. The roofline is neatly blended into the kickup over the rear wheel, giving the appearance of a fastback but the headroom of a sedan. The chopped-off rear deck is a nice compromise between the cuteness of a Honda 600 coupe and the sexiness of a 240Z. In sum, the SL's appearance seems perfectly matched to its personality.

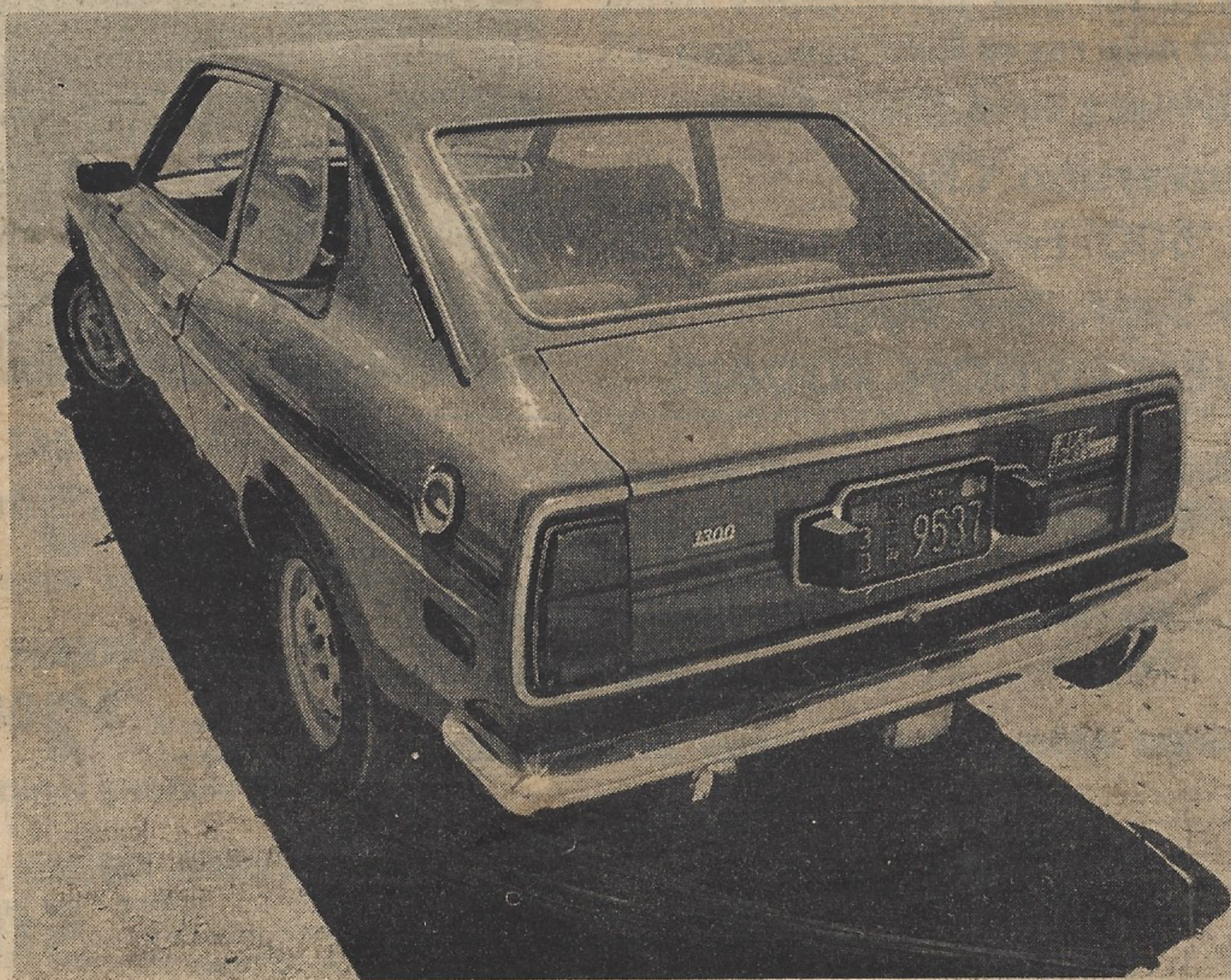
Sitting in the driver's seat for the first time, you're instantly aware of the car's Italian character. Big, round, easy-to-read speedo and tach, flanked by fuel and temperature gauges. Unfortunately, there are no gauges for amps and oil

position. On the other hand, the foot and leg room is sparse for 6-footers. Unless you're smaller than average, you're liable to find your knees up around the steering wheel and no place to put your feet. Italians must have long arms and short legs.

There are only a few other things worth complaining about. The worst thing about the car is the shoulder harness mounting location. If we were all built like Mario Andretti, or if we didn't use a harness, we might not care. But we're not and we do, and we wouldn't buy the car no matter how much we liked it until that one thing was fixed. The mounting point for the harness is behind and below your left shoulder. No matter how you adjust it, it simply will not stay on your body. If it *didn't* slide off when you did hit something, it would drive your shoulder clear down into your stomach. There are other cars which have the same stupid problem, mostly 2-door hardtops, and there is no excuse for it. There must be some place in the roof which would take the loading required of a shoulder harness mount. And with mandatory belt and harness laws being considered, the offending manufacturers had better find the right place.

Another gripe concerned the brakes. Not that they weren't excellent—they're probably as good as or better than any production brakes around—but they wail like a banshee whenever they're used. Judging from early road tests of 128 sedans, this is a recurring problem with the chassis. Wouldn't it be nice if the Fiat engineers would get around to fixing it? *Macho-types* may enjoy turning heads for 3 square miles every time they roll up to a traffic light, but most people don't.

Other complaints concerned the difficult down/right/back gyration necessary to find reverse, the im-



practical location of the radio way over on the right side of the dash and the lack of an accessory position on the ignition switch. Also the ashtray was nearly as useless as the shoulder harness—it's way up in front of the shift lever on the console and it only holds one ash.

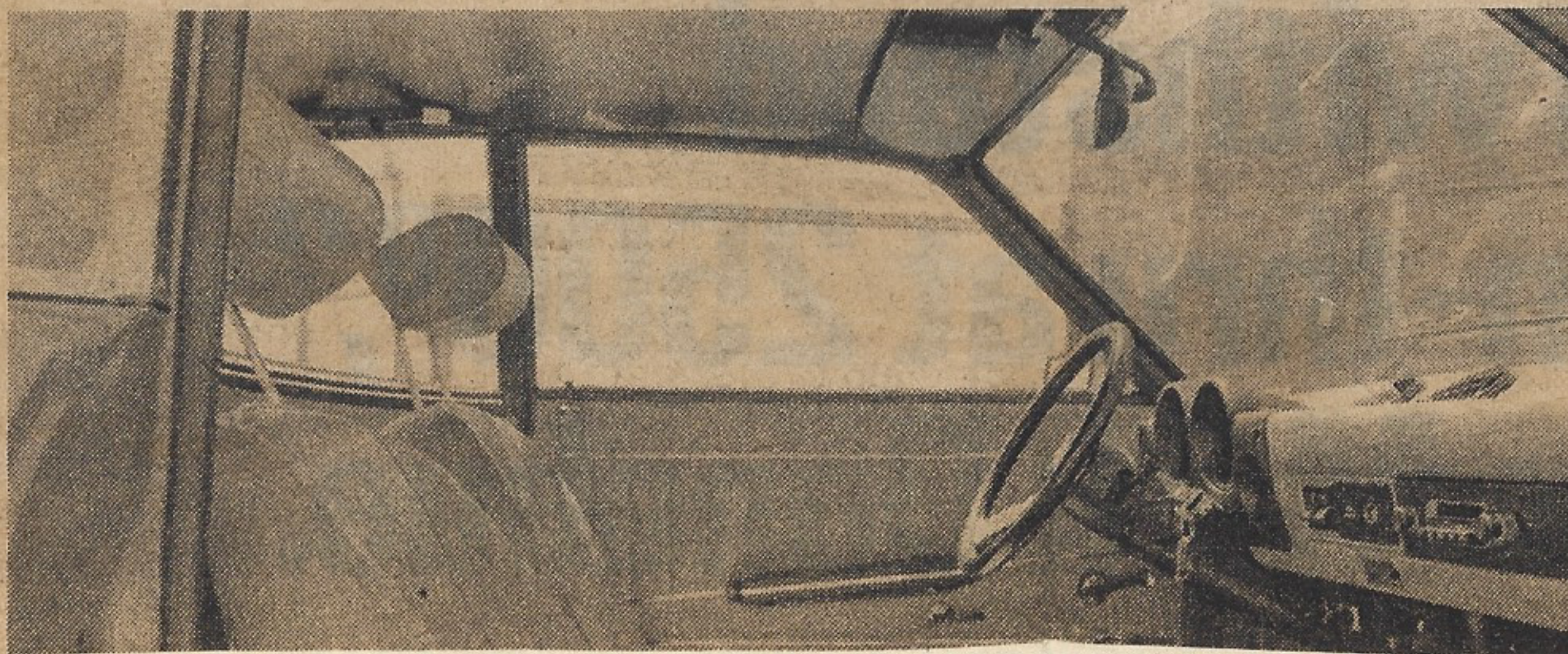
Now for the good part: The engine starts instantly with a manual choke and you can drive away cold with no stumble, bump and grind. It runs smoothly at all speeds and is very peppy for its size and stock power rating. Idle is smooth and quiet even as low as 500rpm, and the slight hesitation encountered getting underway from that speed can be eliminated by setting the idle up a bit with the manual throttle provided. Its specified power peak is 51hp (SAE net) at 5600rpm, but it's redlined way up around 6800rpm and should be able to take a lot of hopping up without hurting its reliability.

Once you get over the shock of not having a workable shoulder harness and still want to drive the car, you're in for a real treat. There's something about the way the seat fits your body and the way the thick leather-covered steering wheel fits your hand that tells you the car wants to be driven hard. As hard as you can drive it. All the time. The shifter is smooth, easy and quick, giving straight-line shifts, even from 2nd to 3rd. Fiat puts radials as standard equipment on the 128SL (ours were Michelins), and they get the job done in spite of their fairly small 145 x 13" size.

Everyone will have his own opinion about front wheel drive—either love or hate. Our experience: FWD provides great traction but is tricky to handle at



From the incomprehensible confluence of swoopy angles above the rear wheel-well to the exceptional interior luxury, the car cries out "Viva Italia."



an occasional bathtub Porsche. A few discovered Lotuses and even Morgans, while the rest progressed through MGAs and Bs, TR3s and 4s, E-Types, 3000s, and 911s. As their numbers grew, they congregated in mysterious covens, eating, drinking and sleeping together, acquiring the curious European habits of rallying and road racing, and enduring unbelievable hardships for the sake of their faith. Kids mocked them from power-pack Chevies and flathead Fords; businessmen laughed at them from 4-hole Buicks. They suffered frostbite in the winter and trench-foot in the monsoon season, not to mention rapidly deflating bank accounts and Christmas card lists.

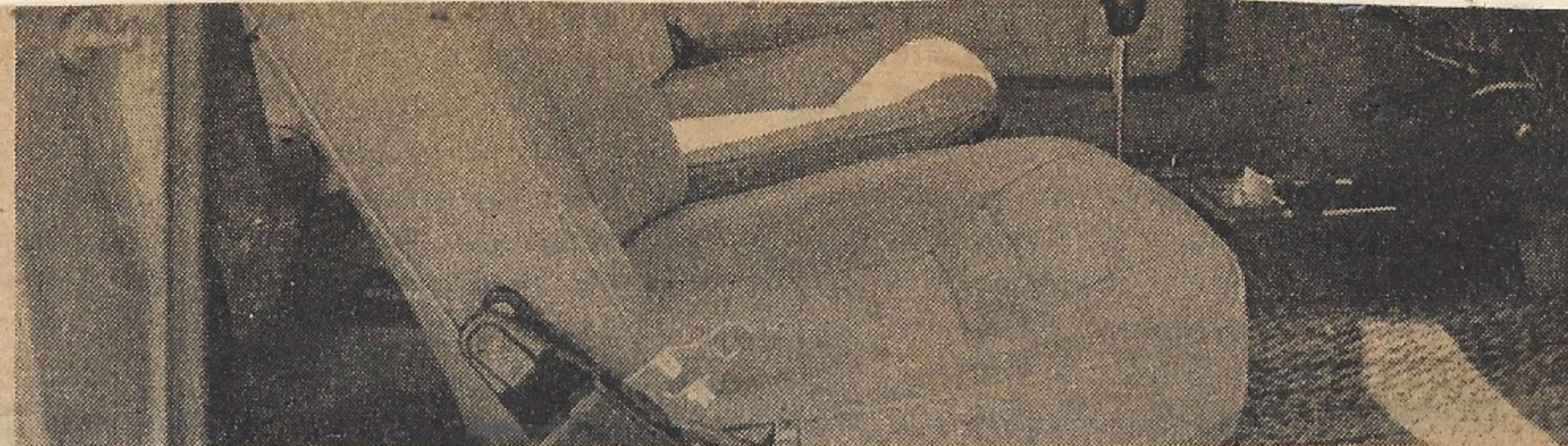
Meanwhile, the Realists were smug in their self-imposed sanity. They bought Plymouths and Ramblers and tolerated Fanatic acquaintances merely out of professional courtesy. They would certainly never permit their daughter to marry one.

Today, of course, most Fanatics, softened by affluence, have become more demanding of their vehicles. It is no longer enough for their cars to be agile and sure-footed; they must be safe, comfortable and reliable as well. Thus air-conditioned Camaros and BMW Bavarias have replaced TRs and Jags in many suburban garages. A tinge of respectability has infected much of the former hard-core. At the same time, many Realists have heard about handling (along with quality control, safety, and economy); some have even begun to understand and appreciate it.

The Fiat 128SL is a car capable of bridging the ever-narrowing gap between the 2 genre of drivers. True, there

the limit of control. Just the opposite of rear wheel drive, it tends to make a car understeer under power and oversteer when the power is released. People who race Minis love them dearly, but they say that one has to pick his cornering line and entry speed carefully, apply power, and then not let off. A sudden decrease in power to the (front) drive wheels causes the front tires to gain traction at the same time the rear tires start to lose it. The result: The back of the car tries to beat you to the exit of the turn. On the other hand, many expert European rally drivers prefer FWD for cornering fast in rough terrain or slippery condition; they like the fact that the drive wheels are also the ones pointing in the direction they want to go, and they use the rear-end breakaway characteristic to fling themselves around the tighter curves. But the fact remains: On dry pavement, many FWD cars will try to drag you straight off the road when you step on the gas and spin you around when you let up on it.

But the 128SL's FWD is something else. It won't outhandle a Mini Cooper



S, but it is certainly easier to drive at its cornering limit, more forgiving, and every bit as much fun as its primitive English counterpart. You can toss the car around, add or decrease power at will, even *brake* halfway through a turn; the car stays stable as a rock at all times. Even the most raving incompetent would find it difficult to get into trouble with this car. He could do it, but he'd have to really work at it.

Amazingly, the suspension soaks up bumps of all types and sizes with no loss of traction. If you've ever had a car change lanes upon hitting a tar strip in the middle of a tight corner, you know what we're talking about. The Fiat is totally unruffled by terrestrial

irregularities, even when cornering flat out. It's unfazed by the most vicious of crosswinds. You can take your hands off the wheel at 90mph on the nastiest 2-lane road around and travel in complete security, knowing that nothing short of an irrigation canal will alter its direction. Don't try that with your Toyota!

Traditionally there have been only 2 kinds of drivers in this country: those who get extreme sensuous pleasure out of going around corners, and those who don't. For the sake of convenience, call the first group Fanatics; the 2nd, Realists.

The Fanatics have always had their special cars. They were weaned on early MGs, Triumphs, Jaguars, Healeys and

will always be die-hard Fanatics who prefer to scramble their kidneys and toy with pneumonia in Morgans and restored MGAs. And there will always be true-blue Realists to defend the Olds 88 as zenith of automotive sense.

But your average, ever-so-slightly-tainted Fanatic will go bananas over the 128SL. He will reach deep into his pocket to produce the necessary coins (about \$3000), ignore the car's weak points and instantly forget everything he's ever heard about the traditional fragility of Italian cars.

And for the awakened Realist, the Fiat 128SL will be a sore temptation. After his first test drive he'll dutifully return home to shovel gas into the family Buick, but he'll be troubled by the promise of an illicit secret love. In the weeks thereafter, he'll see people who defy an immediate classification of Fanatic buzzing around in the Fiat, obviously having a comfortable hell of a good time. And then he'll be afraid. Because he'll know that the little bugger could turn him into a Fanatic if he ever got close to it again.

Fiat 128SL Specifications

ENGINE

Type: Transverse in-line 4, single overhead cam
Displacement: 1290cc (78.7cid)
Bore/Stroke: 3.39 x 2.185 in.
(86/55.5mm)
Compression Ratio: 8.5:1
Induction: 1 vertical downdraft carburetor
Ignition: Battery coil and distributor
Horsepower: 51 SAE net at 5600rpm
Torque: 62 ft.lb. at 3000rpm

DRIVE TRAIN

Type: Front engine, front wheel drive
Transmission: 4-speed manual—1st, 3.583;

2nd, 2.355; 3rd, 1.454; 4th, 1.042; reverse, 3.714
Axle Ratio: 4.077

SUSPENSION

Front: Independent, McPherson Strut (coil springs over pillar shocks)
Rear: Transverse leaf spring

BRAKES

Power assisted, front discs, rear drums

WHEELS

Steel, 4.5J13

TIRES

145 SR 13 Radial ply

STEERING

Type: rack and pinion
Ratio: 32.15:1

GENERAL DIMENSIONS

Curb Weight: 1895 pounds
Wheelbase: 87.5 inches
Track (front/rear): 52.2/52.5 inches
Overall length: 151.8 inches
Height: 51.6 inches
Width: 61.4 inches

MISCELLANEOUS

Fuel Tank Capacity: 12.5 U.S. gallons
Engine Oil Capacity: 4 U.S. quarts
Octane Requirement: Regular grade, 91RON
Fuel Economy (observed): 27-32mpg
Luggage Space: 13 cubic feet

STANDARD EQUIPMENT

Steel mag wheels, dual visors, day and night interior mirror, bumper guards, reclining bucket seats with headrests, radial ply tires, front-wheel disc brakes, tachometer, locking steering wheel, 2-speed windshield wiper with washer, flow-through ventilation, carpeting, glove compartment, undercoating, inertia-reel belt and harness system, heater.

OPTIONAL EQUIPMENT

AM/FM radio

PRICE

Retail price: (2-door, 4-speed) \$2795 plus freight, dealer preparation and local tax.
Price as tested: \$2897 plus tax (including AM/FM radio).