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car audio

AUGUST 1997

AND ELECTRONICS

1 NEW CORVETTE

30 CDs

2,500 MILES ON



SEVEN COMPONENTS TESTED:

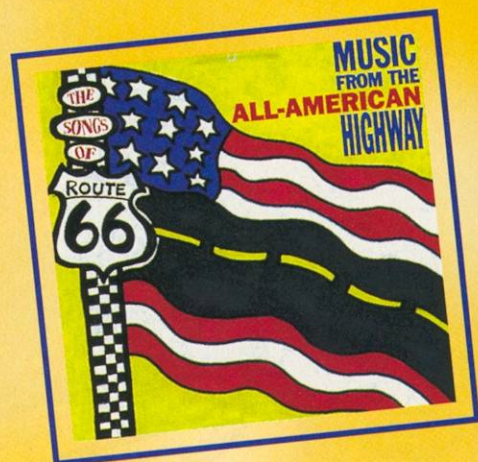
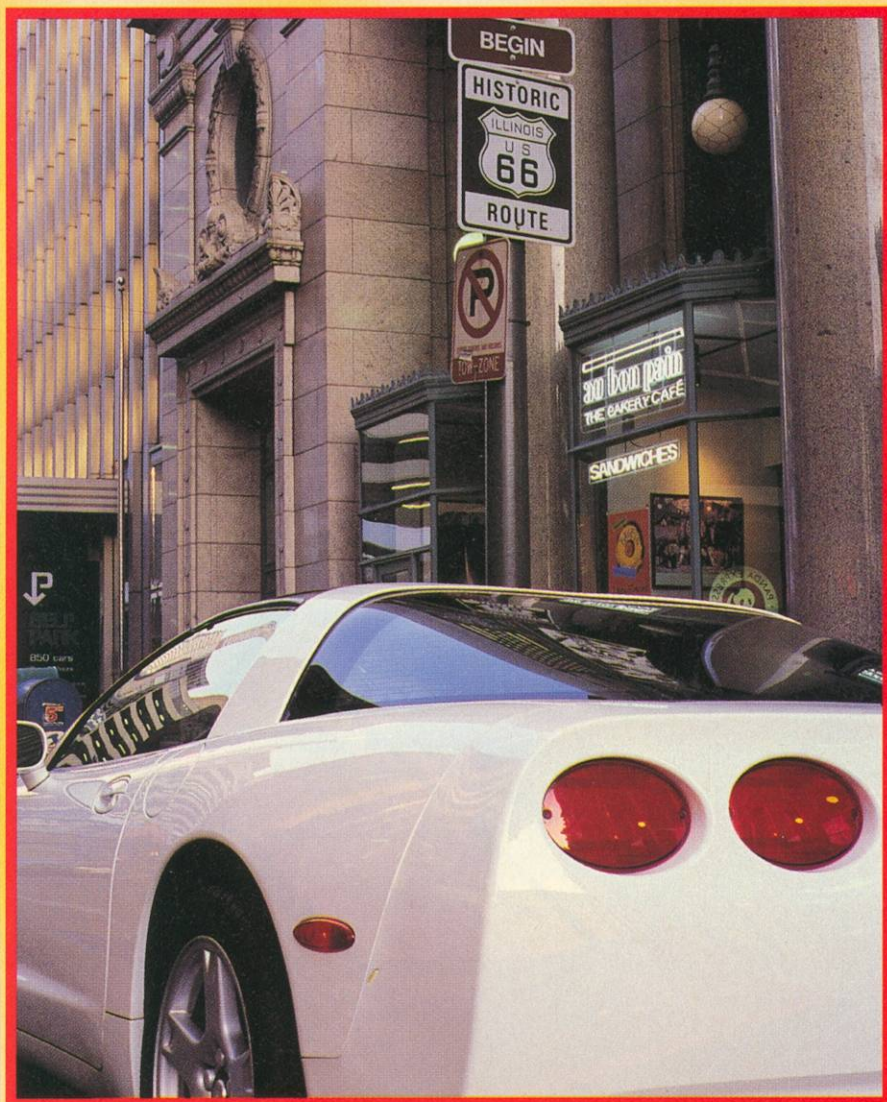
- Denon, Kenwood and Rockford Head Units
- Infinity, Phaze Audio/Butler and Monolithic Amps
- AudioControl's Master Volume Control

USA \$3.95
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1 Corvette, 30 CDs,

Join CA&E's Editor As He Gets His Kicks On Route 66.



1920s, it has gone by many different names, the Mother Road, the National Trails Highway, and just the double-six. Officially, Route 66 no longer exists. It was decommissioned some years ago, its Chicago-to-Los-Angeles route long ago replaced by a number of interstates and superhighways that bypassed hundreds of cities and towns.

The trip I planned would allow for a more leisurely exploration of Middle America, and, in keeping with the All-American motif, all the CDs I took along with me were from distinctively American artists—from Nat King Cole to Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers to The Beach Boys. All have come to represent our love affair with our cars as well as the music we are so passionate about.

One of our primary goals each month is to find new ways to grab the interest of our readers. The number of story possibilities may be infinite, but ways to present them to keep it all fresh and interesting are decidedly limited. And while Route 66 road trips have been a magazine staple for years (every magazine from *Life* to *Automobile* has run variations of the theme), I wanted to make this trip alone, so readers might feel as if they were in the seat next to me.

Since I was traveling without a navigator, my constant guide for the duration of the trip would be Tom Snyder's (not that Tom Snyder) fascinating book, "Route 66 Traveler's Guide and Roadside Companion."

Often it is difficult to understand why we are so obsessed with our quest for great sound. For some, competition is the motivation. For others, it's the passion to design and tinker with audio systems. But for almost all of us, the bottom line (as cliché as it sounds), is the music. It justifies parting with hard-earned cash and putting forth the effort; great sound is an important part of our lives.

When the obsession strikes, what better cure could there be than hitting the road with more than 30 classic CDs from a vari-

ety of musical styles? Maybe having the keys to a brand-new 1997 Corvette (number 28 off the line)? Better still, spend eight days and cruise 2,500 miles on the most-storied road in America, Route 66, also known as America's Main Street. When I recently came down with a severe case of office fever, I knew it was time to hit the road.

A Little Background

There is a mania currently surrounding Route 66, and it goes far deeper than Route 66 being just another road. Since the

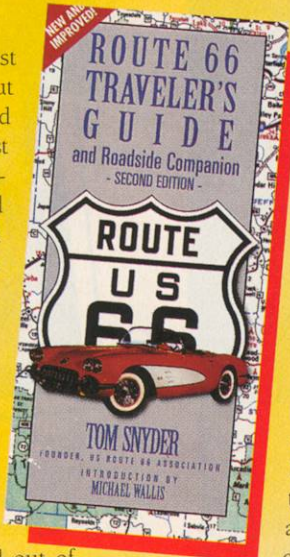
2,500 Miles on

ROUTE 66

It drew me to what almost looked like an alleyway, but there I saw the shield "Historic Route 66," the first of hundreds of white-and-brown markers that would act as vehicular bread crumbs, drawing me to a pier in Santa Monica a week hence. So kick back, fasten your seat belt, and over the next few pages we'll cover 2,500 miles together.

Free As A Bird

At daybreak on a brisk, springtime Saturday morning, I pulled out of the garage of my hotel on Chicago's lakefront and headed to Michigan and Adams, the acknowledged "official" start of Route 66. Being the lazy person I am (and forgetting that my Vette was also equipped with a 12-disc CD changer), for the first leg of the trip, I slipped a greatest-hits CD—*Music From The All American*



this obsession for the route. The jazz-inspired beat helped get my blood moving (and a good thing, too, as I'd yet to find a Starbucks where I could get at least 32 ounces of leaded coffee in me).

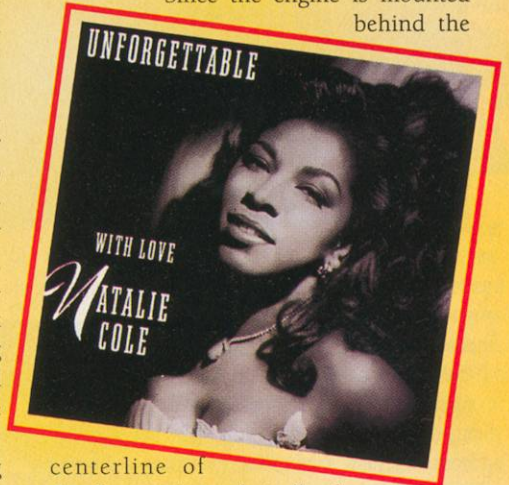
After getting the required location shots, I took off for Lou Mitchell's—a Chicago landmark—for my first breakfast "on the road." Like so many places that I planned to visit, Lou Mitchell's has been immortalized not only in literature, but also in a number of outstanding car-culture calendars produced

by Lucinda Lewis (Machine Age Publishing, 818/788-1873).

After a quick breakfast, and feeling more wide awake, it was time to get moving westward. Replacing the first CD with Natalie Cole's *Unforgettable*, I realized that the album was not famous for her rendition of "Route 66," but for her duet, "Unforgettable," with her late father Nat King Cole. (Nat King Cole had recorded "Route 66" more than 40 years earlier.) The song "Unforgettable" is an outstanding recording, and a great test of the Bose system that this and

with a six-speed gearbox, mounted in the rear (also for the first time).

Since the engine is mounted behind the



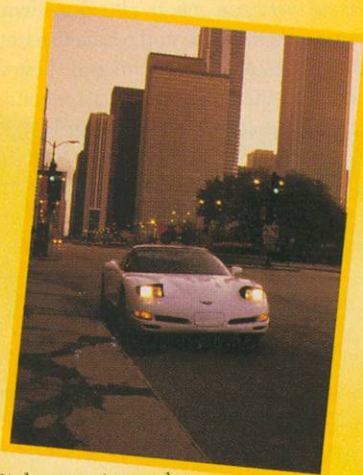
centerline of the front axle, technically the new Vette is a mid-engined car. Driving west on I-55, I was impressed with the solid feel of the car. As much as I almost hate to admit it, it seemed to share a closer kinship with classic front-engined sports cars of the 1960s (dare I say Ferrari?) than the 43 years of Corvettes that preceded it.

By nightfall on the first day, and several CDs later (by this time I had loaded up the rear-compartment 12-disc changer), I was in St. Louis, Missouri, having cruised past the Gateway Arch and Busch Stadium.

On The Road Again

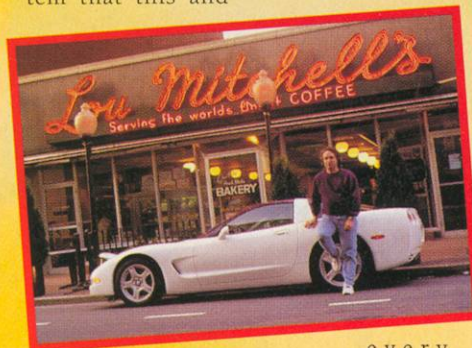
In the morning, I hooked up with John Skalicky—CA&E's ace lensman—and a group of Corvette enthusiasts from the Boone's Trail Corvette Club. Through an Internet connection, they had invited me to put my loaner Vette through its paces in an autocross. For those not familiar with the term, an autocross is a course marked with cones, typically in a large parking lot. The object is to go as fast as you can without hitting any cones. If you do, you are penalized two seconds for each cone nicked. Trust me, it's not as easy as it sounds.

Unlike the other competitors, I chose to drive the course with the roof off and the system cranked, this time to the strains of Springsteen's "Born to Run" (I



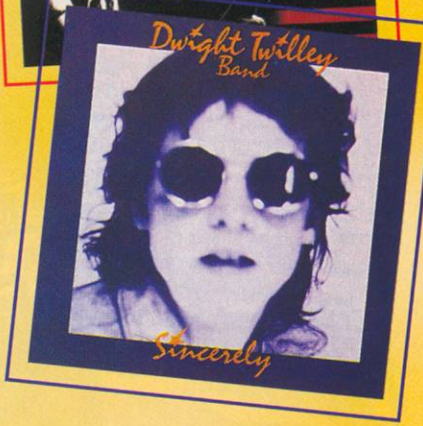
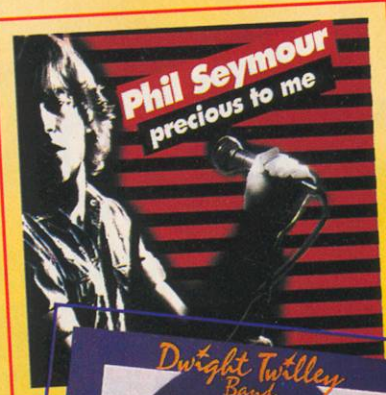
Highway—into the in-dash AM/FM/CD tuner and took off for the first photo opportunity.

At 5:30 a.m., Chicago's streets were virtually deserted and my sleek, white Corvette drew no attention from the few souls up this early. The first cut on this disc is an instrumental cut from the 1960s television series, "Route 66." The weekly, cross-country adventures depicted on this show are credited by many with fueling



every new Corvette is equipped with (see "Five Generations of Corvette Audio" sidebar for additional technical details).

With Chicago shrinking in my rearview mirror, I alternated between sections of the old road and Interstate 55, getting the feel for the new Corvette and its capabilities. New from the ground up (for the first time since 1984), this '97 Vette was equipped

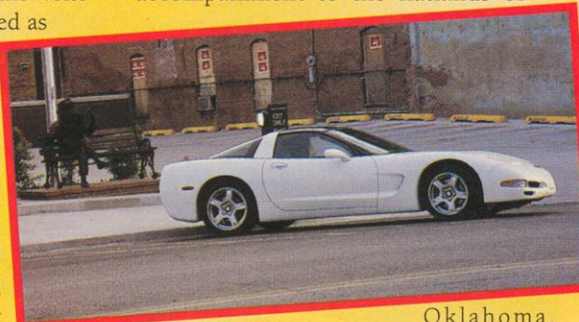


am a Jersey guy after all) from the *Live Collection*. Although I didn't win, I completed all six runs—spinning twice—with my best run being within four seconds of best in class. Overall I was pleased, and had more than 30 members take the Vette for a test drive. I later found out via e-mail that two members placed orders for 1998 Corvettes the following week.

On the way into Tulsa, Oklahoma I stopped in Claremore—home of Will Rogers, well-known as a writer and grass roots philosopher—and parked the Vette next to his statue. It almost seemed as if he was checking out the Vette, maybe to place his own order. After Tulsa, the next stop was Stillwater, Oklahoma, to check out a trick aftermarket Kenwood/AudioControl system installed in a 1996 Collector Edition Corvette, owned by Ai Research's Joe Gross. It would give me an excellent opportunity to compare and contrast the Bose system in my Vette with a full-bore IASCA com-

petition system. For this leg, I decided to put two of my favorite artists in the CD changer, Dwight Twilley and Phil Seymour, both closely identified with the Tulsa recording scene since the late 1970s.

The Dwight Twilley Band had a top-20 hit with "I'm On Fire" from 1975's *Sincerely*, while bandmate Seymour had a number of mid-pack solo hits that included the Beatlesque "Precious to Me." The recently released retrospective, *Precious to Me*, provided the perfect accompaniment to the flatlands of



Oklahoma, and later, the north Texas panhandle. With the rockin' "Baby It's You" cranked, the

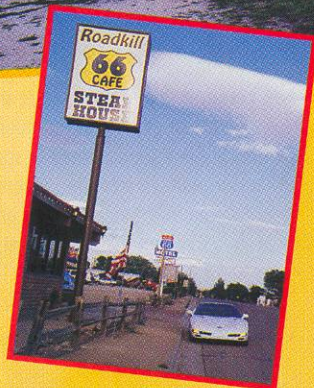
speedometer touched 140 for the first time on a desolate stretch of the old road somewhere east of Amarillo, Texas. Growing up enjoying their music, I thought that Twilley and Seymour had unrealized potential to be an American Lennon and McCartney. Time proved that this would not be the case.

On Wednesday night, I visited the world-famous Big Texas Steak House, home of the free 72-ounce steak—free, that is, if you can eat it all, along with shrimp cocktail, salad, and a baked potato in 60 minutes or less. The record, believe it or not, is nine minutes and 30 seconds. Although I got off to a promising start, by the 30-minute mark, I realized that I was going to come up short, and I only managed to get through 60 ounces before time ran out. No disgrace though, as someone almost twice my size had come up two ounces short, 30 minutes earlier.

The Long And Winding Road

Amarillo was overcast the following morning, promising a grey day for the drive to Albuquerque. A few miles west of

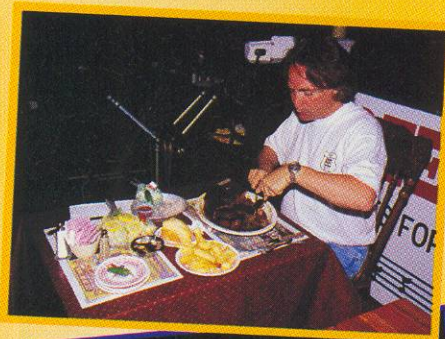




town is the famous Cadillac Ranch. Often referred to as an American Stonehenge, seeing land yachts buried up to their door handles is an impressive sight.

Arriving in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which had been my home for five years, was a homecoming of sorts. Albuquerque is a multicultural southwestern city with equal parts of Native American, Hispanic, and Anglo influences. But something everyone here seems to agree upon is the fondness for country music.

When I arrived there in 1992, I had the opportunity to attend the bi-annual Unser family Halloween party, and Al Unser Jr.'s favorite band, Sawyer Brown, entertained more than 2,000 guests. It just so happened that they had a recently released CD available, the appropriately named *Six Days on the Road*. That, along with *Asleep*



5 Generations of Corvette Audio

The introduction of the 1997 Corvette represents the fifth major change in the design evolution of America's favorite sports car. Over the



years, the Corvette, as one of GM's flagships, has launched many of GM's mobile audio innovations as factory-installed equipment.

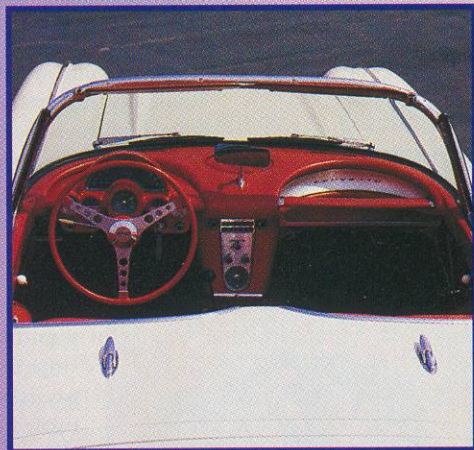
This year, GM has built upon the past relationship with Bose to develop a new music system designed especially for its new Corvette. Unlike previous Corvettes, where the Bose Music System was optional, all 1997 Corvettes are equipped with 100-watt Bose Music Systems. Owners can select an AM/FM/CD over the standard AM/FM/cassette head unit (both with built-in CD changer controls). Chevrolet also offers a 12-disc CD changer with both units as either a factory- or dealer-installed option.

This year, Bose employs a new speaker technology, Nd™, which uses innovative materials for lighter-weight speakers with high-output charac-

teristics, while reducing the size of the magnet structure. This thin 8-inch speaker is used in conjunction with a 3 1/2-inch tweeter/midrange speaker to provide outstanding reproduction of a full spectrum of sound.

Since Bose engineers entered the design process at an early stage of the new Corvette's development, they were able to have input on the design of the door structure, thus optimizing the location of the front speakers. This results in superior staging (for a factory-installed system).

Something that I have noticed in my evaluation of a number of Bose systems is that I seem to hear instruments in the upper midrange on familiar material that I have not heard on other high-performance systems. Because both the Bose system and the



aftermarket systems produce impressive RTA graphs and frequency response curves, I am at a loss to explain this, other than to say that it exists. In the coming months we hope to make a more detailed evaluation of this phenomenon.

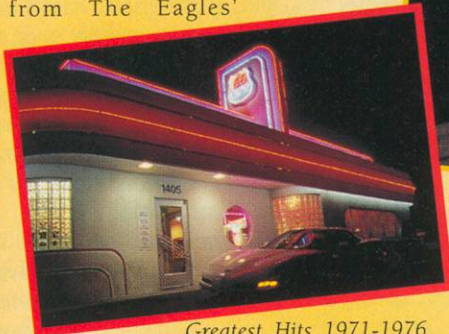
Taking a step back into the audio archives, first-generation Corvettes, from

1953 to 1962, have a charm all their own. Audio had a low priority with GM designers. The interior of the Corvette, with its dual-cockpit design, placed a conventional AM-band shaft radio either high in the dash (1953-1957) or low in the dash (1958-1962).

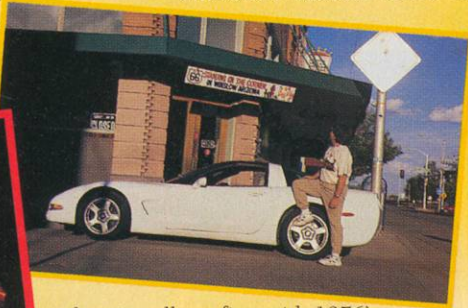


at the Wheel Live, was added to the CD changer before I headed up Nine Mile Hill, Central Avenue, Route 66, west of the city.

Back on the road again, I made my way toward Arizona. On three prior trips on old Route 66, I had detoured through Winslow, Arizona. Naturally, with this being a musically themed trip, I had to drive through town with "Take It Easy" from The Eagles'



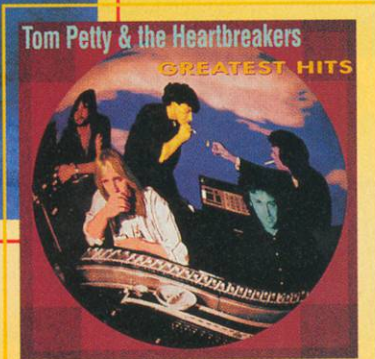
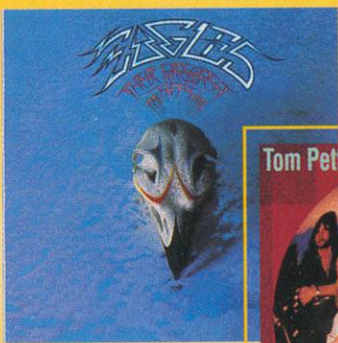
Greatest Hits 1971-1976 turned up loud. There is even a corner in Winslow that is marked as "the corner in Winslow, Arizona." Unfortunately, no flatbed Ford happened to drive by, but the white Vette attracted a large group of teenage admirers while parked.



days in college, first with 1976's "American Girl." Unfortunately for me, there was no American girl in the passenger seat for this trip, just maps, guidebooks, my laptop, and empty Arizona- and Snapple-iced-tea bottles.

After a detour to see the Grand Canyon, I stopped in Williams, Arizona, to replenish my own tank. There I learned that Williams was the last town along Route 66 that was bypassed by the interstate highways. Believe it or not, at one time, it was the only traffic light between Chicago and Los Angeles.

Pulling out of town, I knew I was on the home stretch, less than 500 miles from home. Approaching the California border after 10 p.m. Friday, I decided to stop in Needles instead of pushing onward. That turned out to be a wise decision, as I was dead tired and it would have been a shame to drive the unspoiled California high desert portions of Route 66 in darkness.



Several aftermarket manufacturers offer modified AM/FM/cassette receivers to fit this application. The units fit these applications with no modifications and now include models with built-in CD-changer controls.

Since early Corvettes had only a single dash-mounted oval speaker, to get stereo reproduction it is possible to install two smaller circular speakers in the same location. In addition, where an original look is not required, small speaker enclosures can be installed behind the bucket seats.

The second generation of Corvettes, the 1963 through 1967 Sting Rays, built upon the dual cock-



pit design of the first generation and extended the center section of the instrument panel to further separate the driver and passenger. Complicating the installation of upgraded systems is that during this period, the radio was mounted vertically with the control shafts mounted on top. FM bands were first offered as factory-installed options during this era. Custom Autosound Manufacturing offers a selection of Pioneer and Kenwood receivers with the shafts already modified to facilitate easy installation in this application.

The third generation of Corvettes, 1968 through 1982, offered variations of the then-current GM shaft radio layout, although there were several differences over the years. In addition, both 8-track



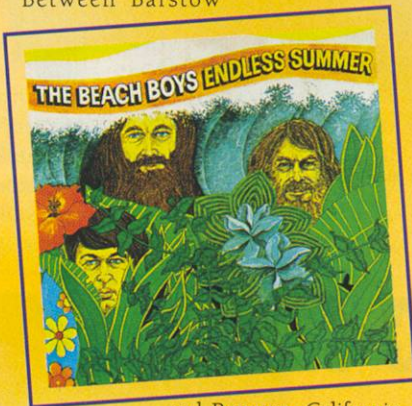
and cassette combinations were first offered as factory-installed options during this period.

From 1968 to 1976, the bezel into which the radio was mounted was made of metal. This required a small nosepiece receiver with extra-wide shaft spacing. At one time, units like this were common in the aftermarket, but with the move to DIN-style receivers, this configuration is no longer offered by mainstream manufacturers. Again Custom Autosound Manufacturing has come

California Dreamin'

Refreshed Saturday morning, I reloaded the CD changer one last time. Since this was California, a collection of The Beach Boys CDs filled the magazine. More than any other American band, The Beach Boys are inexorably linked to Southern California car culture. For the final five hours of my road trip, before playing the classic *Endless Summer* and *Spirit of America* CD collections, I opted for two off-beat, Beach-Boys-related CDs. For the long desert stretches, I played *Stack-O-Tracks*, a collection of The Beach Boys' best-known hits without their trademark vocals. "In My Room" and "Surfer Girl" turned out to be perfect as I sped through the desert, taking in both the beauty of the desert and the Vette's exceptional open-road abilities. East of Barstow, the desert is dotted with a number of ghost towns; left-over relics from Route 66's heyday in the 1950s. This parched, desolate region was a favorite for Hollywood types to film a wide variety of commercials and films needing a desert backdrop.

Between Barstow



and Pomona, California, I tried *Stars and Stripes Vol. 1*, a tribute CD featuring classic Beach Boys tunes recorded by country artists with The Beach Boys providing back-up vocals. Neither country or pure pop, it is a wonderful collection from the likes of Lorrie Morgan ("Don't Worry Baby"), Ricky Van Shelton ("Fun, Fun, Fun"), Willie Nelson ("The Warmth of the Sun"), and Kathy Troccoli ("I Can Hear Music") among others.

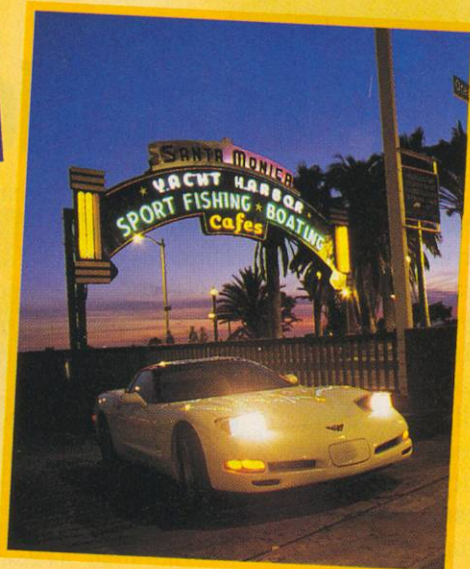
From Pomona, through Pasadena and finally on to Santa Monica, I used



the disc- and track-select controls to find all my Beach Boys favorites from *Endless Summer* and *Spirit of America*. These included "Be True to Your School," "I Get Around," "Wendy," "Help Me Rhonda," "Good Vibrations," "409," and "This Car of Mine"—each and every track a true American classic.

By the time I reached the Santa Monica pier, the end of the road, I had covered more than 2,500 miles, detours included. I'd burned more than 125 gallons of fuel, averaging almost 25 miles per gallon (pretty remarkable given the performance envelope the Vette provided and how hard it was driven at times). Now all that remained to be done was to return the car to Chevrolet's representatives after the Memorial Day weekend.

At my desk Tuesday morning, I had the opportunity to reflect on the journey just completed. I admitted to myself that the new Corvette is knocking at the door of world-class standards, minor details the last barrier stopping it from taking its rightful place in the upper echelon of sports cars. On the other hand, the Corvette's new Bose Music System sets new standards for factory-installed systems. At full volume, with the right CDs, the odometer spinning effortlessly, slices of Americana become a blur. Remember to slow down and savor a compelling combination; great tunes, a dazzling automobile, and a road not easily forgotten. ▲



to the rescue, offering units to fit this application.

The third generation of Corvettes adopted a design change in 1977 that ran through the end of the series in 1982. The center bezel of the instrument panel was redesigned and changed over to a plastic material and a change in the nosepiece and shaft spacing allowed for most aftermarket shaft radios to be installed with little difficulty. The change to plastic also allowed the installation of contemporary DIN-style receivers although the dash bezel would no longer qualify as stock.

The biggest evolution in Corvette audio occurred with the early introduction of the 1984 fourth-generation (there was no 1983) Corvette. With a newly designed, large-face receiver shared with other GM vehicles and the availability of the Bose Music System option, the Corvette truly represented the flagship position in GM's audio system hierarchy.

Well-received at the time of its introduction, this signaled the true start of GM's direct competition with the audio aftermarket. Although better than virtually any factory-installed system, the original Bose Music System fell a bit short of better aftermarket systems. Front speaker location in the door, dictated by the vehicle's design, was less than optimum, and the system did not match up well in the areas of extended bass response and high output.

In 1990, the dash of the Corvette came in for



a redesign with the introduction of a new double-DIN-style receiver, and included a combination in-dash AM/FM/CD/cassette receiver option. By this time, more than half of all new Corvettes were equipped with the Bose Music System option. This photo illustrates a 96 collectors edition dash with a Kenwood AM/FM/CD receiver installed.

For more than four decades, the Corvette has represented a special part of American automotive folklore. The images of cruising the open road with the top down or the roof panel off, wind in the face, hair blowing in the breeze, the rumble of a big V-8 under the hood, is uniquely American. When the Corvette, no matter what the vintage, is equipped with an outstanding high-performance audio system, the experience is even better.