



ESCAPE ROADS

DON KLEIN

1966 FITCH PHOENIX

A ONE OF A KIND'S ONE OF A KIND

BY DON KLEIN

■ JOHN FITCH HOPED his Corvair-based Phoenix would prove to be the "American Porsche."

Instead, it proved that timing is everything, and Fitch's couldn't have been worse. Too bad, because 46 years later, the prototype still turns heads and snaps necks.

The Phoenix wasn't the first General Motors car to bear Fitch's name. By using what he learned transforming the Corvette from a boulevard cruiser to a bona fide race car, Fitch, who died Oct. 31 (see obituary in Comp), turned the ill-handling Corvair into the agile Fitch Sprint. He intended to make a lightweight racer "Super Sprint" version, as well, but the Sports Car Club of America's decision to institute Formula Vee obviated the need for another spec series, and the project was dropped. Undaunted, Fitch and co-designer Coby Whitmore adapted the Super Sprint's basic lines to create the Phoenix.

By now, Fitch was confident he had a formula for success: Take a simple production platform (for easy access to parts and service),

modify the suspension for better handling, boost the power and give it a sexy body. In other words, do for Corvair what Porsche had done for VW.

Fitch shortened the Corvair's wheelbase from 108 inches to 95, replaced the front drums with Girling discs and made other Sprint suspension upgrades. Handling was further enhanced by staggered wheels (175 x 14 for the front; 185 x 14 for the rear), and the 140-cid flat six was tuned to 170 hp, thanks mostly to four two-barrel Weber carbs.

Weighing in at just 2,150 pounds, the Phoenix went from 0 to 60 mph in 7.5 seconds, with a top speed of 130 mph.

For the prototype's steel body, Fitch entrusted Intermechanica in Italy. His dedication to driver safety dictated features such as a roll bar in the C-pillar and a front-end crumple zone. The fender humps give the car a dated look, but serve a necessary function: Each houses a different-sized spare.

Particularly when viewed from the front, the Phoenix bears a strong resemblance

to the C3 Sting Ray that debuted two years later; 1968 was also the first year that Corvette offered a T-top, another Phoenix feature. Fitch had shown his design to a number of Corvette insiders before the Phoenix was built and sometimes displayed the car with a sign proclaiming it was the prototype for the C3.

Fitch planned to sell the Phoenix for \$8,700 through Chevrolet dealerships and Abercrombie & Fitch (no relation), which debuted the car in its Manhattan, N.Y., store on July 4, 1966. About 100 deposits were received, but a few months later the

National Traffic and Motor Safety Vehicle Act was signed, giving the government a say in vehicle design and manufacture. Then GM killed the Corvair and with it, Fitch's

stream of production and replacement parts. He returned the deposits, but kept the prototype

Despite considerable offers from museums and collectors, Fitch refused to part with his beloved Phoenix. One of his greatest joys was taking SCCA corner workers on parade laps at Lime Rock on race weekends, something he did until shortly before his death. The car now belongs to his sons. 🏎️

DOLLARS & SENSE

ORIGINAL LIST PRICE: \$8,700

CURRENT MARKET VALUE: N/A