



OWNERSHIP \ 1952 CUNNINGHAM C-3 CONTINENTAL

HOT ROD SUEDE

This unrestored Italo-American hybrid is perfect as is

BY TOM COTTER





"I KNOW WHERE A CUNNINGHAM is sitting in a basement," said my friend John Finger one day while we were discussing barn finds.

No way, I thought—he must be mistaken. It's probably some kind of fiberglass kit car powered by a VW engine.

"A friend owns it," he said. "I can take you there next week."

Still, couldn't be. Briggs Cunningham built only 25 C-3 Continentals (20 coupes and five convertibles) in order to homologate his C-2R and C-4R race cars to compete in the 24 Hours of Le Mans. Organizers informed Cunningham that he'd have to build cars, like Jaguar and Ferrari, in order to enter.

So he became a reluctant manufacturer.

B.S. Cunningham Co. built the chassis and installed the drivetrains at team headquarters in West Palm Beach, Florida. Rolling chassis were then shipped to Torino, Italy, and clothed in a voluptuous aluminum body at Carrozzeria Vignale. C-3s resembled the Ferrari 212 bodied by the same coachbuilder, but on steroids. Cunningham's street cars had the most powerful engines of the day, Chrysler's mighty 331-cubic-inch Hemi fueled by four carburetors.

When marketed in the United States, the C-3 model sold for \$10,000 and up, making it the most expensive American automobile of that era. Consequently, they were purchased by wealthy enthusiasts such as Nelson Rockefeller and Carl Kiekhaefer, founder of Mercury Marine. So how could one of those fabulous cars end up sleeping for decades in a Greenville, South Carolina, basement?

The owner, Sam Harrison, met John and me early the next Saturday morning, opened the door and there sat an honest-to-goodness Cunningham C-3 coupe, a car I had dreamed of owning for decades. Painted flat black, the large two-seater sat on four flat tires and was covered with dust and spider webs.



MATT CASHORE (6)

Mechanically sound and a blast to drive, but otherwise unrestored, Cunningham C-3 No. 5207 is a rare car in even rarer condition.

Sam quickly tempered my enthusiasm. "It's not for sale," he said. "My father always loved Cunninghams, so I bought it in his memory."

Little by little, though, I wore Sam down, convincing him that should he decide to sell, I would be a worthy caretaker. I had once met Briggs Cunningham himself at his Costa Mesa, California, automobile museum in the early 1980s. From that point on, I became infatuated with the man, his racing legend and his cars; I already had every related collectible, toy, artwork and book on the market. The only thing I was missing was an actual C-3.

A couple of years later, Sam called and said he was ready to sell. By that evening, I owned a car that I really knew very little about; I had just purchased a car without any documentation whatsoever. There was no VIN, but I found that the Chrysler engine number was how early cars were identified. My Hemi was No. 20-1012, meaning my car was No. 5207—the second C-3 built. Investigating further, my car had been the company's "media car," featured in many book and magazine road tests. I trolled eBay and purchased examples of those documents within a few

days. Magazine stories showed that, when new, my car had originally worn a beautiful three-tone paint job: dark green, medium green and crème.

I also discovered my car had won Concours d'Elegance events in 1952 at both Watkins Glen and Elkhart Lake, held in conjunction with their respective grands prix. I discovered photos of the car at those events through historical groups at each track. It's wonderful that car people never throw anything away, because I have secured 50- and 60-year-old titles and ownership documents from some of the car's previous six owners.

Briggs' desire of winning Le Mans never materialized (though he did finish as high as third). But his race cars won every major road race in the United States, including Watkins Glen, Elkhart Lake and Sebring. As an enduring tribute to Briggs and his cars, all 25 C-3s built still exist today.

In the eight years since I purchased my Cunningham, I have rebuilt the car's mechanicals but left the cosmetics as found. Since then, it has been entered in several Concours d'Elegance and other car shows and taken on road tours, and even competed in the Grand Ascent hill climb in Hershey, Pennsylvania (where it beat a Lotus 7!).

With its "hot rod suede" paint job and Hemi engine, it is just as welcome at rod and muscle-car events as at classic-car shows. Will I ever give it a complete restoration? Perhaps one day, but right now I'm having too much fun with the world's most valuable rat rod. Check back with me in another decade. 🍀

Tom Cotter is a collector and author of numerous books on barn-find classics. His Cunningham is on display at the Studebaker National Museum in South Bend, Indiana as a part of its "Powered By America: The Original Hybrid" exhibition. The C-3 is there through March; the full exhibition runs through June 4.



MATT CASHORE

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■ Red with black vinyl interior, black vinyl top. 180-hp, air-cooled, turbocharged flat-six; four-speed manual floor shift, bucket seats, dual exhaust, wire wheel hubcaps. Very clean and well done; no complaints about paint, chrome, top fit or interior. This was obviously someone's well-loved, well-cared-for Corvair convertible.

SOLD AT \$16,740

The Corsa convertible was the top dog in the '65 Corvair lineup, and, if you can get beyond the whole "it's a Corvair" thing, it's a very respectable, fun-to-drive and versatile (by 1965 GM standards) car.

In 1965, General Motors built 8,353 Corsa convertibles and 20,291 coupes. With a factory price of \$2,608 for the convertibles, plus options, the Corsa was an affordable droptop. They could be equipped to be either sporty, with some performance options, or 1965's version of luxurious—but only 4 percent of total Corvair production in 1965 had air-conditioning.

There are a whole bunch of cars that have priced many collectors and enthusiasts straight out of the market. Yet fortunately, the Corvairs remain affordable as ever. At \$16,740, this car sold below its expected market price, but it's still fairly expensive when you are talking about this model.

Don't buy a Corvair expecting rapid appreciation. Instead, buy it for the incredibly high fun-for-the-money ratio. As someone once said, "It's much better to be going fast in slow car than to go slow in a fast car." You could say something similar about owning and driving an affordable classic.

—DAVE KINNEY



Watkins Glen, 1952: C-3 No. 5207 wearing its original three-tone paint