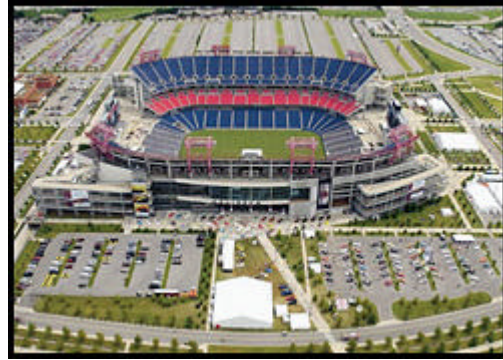


## Sea of Love: Corvette's 50th celebration hits Nashville by storm

By [MAC MORRISON](#)

SPORTS CAR RACER Andy Pilgrim shakes his head. He looks a mixture of bewildered and overwhelmed, as if he can't believe what he finds himself party to. "I've spent three nonstop hours signing autographs," the factory Corvette C5-R driver says, his tone filled with both amazement and humility. "It just shows the impact the race program has on Corvette owners. I mean, three hours... it's bizarre, man."



We know what he means. Early in the day, we're bobbing in a sea of enthusiast love as Chevrolet's Official Corvette 50th Anniversary Celebration rises like a tide over the Nashville Coliseum grounds. The location may seem a bit odd until you realize the turnout: On June 27-28, more than 18,000 people and 10,000 cars from around the world descended on the city to talk shop, admire fiberglass forms and bask in the historical glow of America's sports car. Such an onslaught is too much for the nearby Bowling Green, Kentucky, home of the Corvette assembly plant and National Corvette Museum. But even at the dedicated Coliseum venue, two full days afford barely enough time to take it all in. Heck, we almost don't get past the parking lot.

Organized by the NCM, the National Corvette Caravan—a parade of the marque's followers that has Nashville as its goal—overruns several Coliseum lots.



Regional Caravan sects started early; they set out for Nashville a week before the official event began. With more than 6000 cars from across the United States, the Caravan includes at least one example of just about every Corvette model built. Caravan grand marshal Pilgrim (guiding these people to the Vette Promised Land—could he be more aptly named?) led 1000 cars here from Florida.

Stroll past hundreds of cars parked in one lot, and it's difficult to find specific models. Still, there are original 1953s, Sting Rays, C5s with '53 body kits and a '64 Grand Sport Roadster replica that stops us in our tracks. Unbelievable.

Past the perimeter and inside the Coliseum is even more overwhelming. The cars here are so historically comprehensive that you can overload.

James Kirsch stands on a plot of grass, removed from the National Corvette Restorers Society quadrant. The NCRS is displaying many of its members' award-winning restored and unrestored vehicles, as well as conducting public clinics on virtually every aspect of Corvette restoration.

Kirsch and his car are conspicuous by the distance they keep from the NCRS. All of the cars are special, but Kirsch's occupies a unique place in Corvette history.

"This is the third Corvette produced and the oldest production car issued for public sale," he says of his 1953 convertible, chassis No. 003. The white gem is immaculate, and shows only a bit of wear to the driver's side carpet—and a hint of yellow on the Goodyear whitewalls betrays its age. A small pamphlet with "User instructions for Chevrolet Corvette electric clock" printed on its face hangs from the dash; the contrast to today's encyclopedic owner instruction manuals is indelible.



Would-be Vette owners taste the future.



"Chevrolet used this car for cobblestone road tests, then pulled it apart and found what they wanted to change for the production versions. The brake lines were moved from the outside of the rails. Chevy also changed a few minor suspension things, put the body back on the chassis and sent it out the door with a serial number."

As Kirsch speaks he embodies another contrast of automotive enthusiasm. Not only are many cars here from a bygone era, but so, too, are the people. The glitterati who sip Don Perignon and congregate around other rarified marques are found nowhere in Nashville.



Not that this crowd lacks cash. Kirsch and hundreds more here have poured cubic dollars into their beloved Corvettes—Kirsch says he lost count around \$90,000—and they rank high within the automotive aristocracy. Call them the Vetterati, if you will. For this group, image is defined by what's underhood rather than what hangs around your neck or the trophy on your arm.

Inside the Powertrain and Engineering tent, a swarm of gearheads buzzes around an engine dynamometer simulator that unendingly spins an LS6 V8 to redline and back to idle. Unfortunately, the test bed is barely visible through the masses; but hear it, though, with a rise in crowd noise that corresponds to the increasing revs on its virtual tach. The question is which will explode first, the engine or the crowd?



It's not a party without rock 'n' roll: ZZ Top wraps up the weekend.

Thankfully, neither does.

There is also a historical engine display. Twelve motors—from a '54 235 Blue Flame to a '59 Ram Jet 283 with Zora Arkus-Duntov's high-lift cam, to the 5.7-liter LS6 in the C5—form an impressive and proper Corvette power timeline. Wonder how frame-rails are hydroformed, or what is "magnetorheological ride control"? Engineers are also on hand to fully explain modern Vette systems and structures.

Not far from the tent sits the No. 50 C5-R race car driven by Pilgrim, Kelly Collins and Oliver Gavin in the 2003 24 Hours of Le Mans. The dark-blue Corvette remains in post-race condition; it hasn't been



GM vice chairman Bob Lutz and GM North America president Gary Cowger rate the weekend.

washed since it secured its second-place GTS finish. Neither rope nor fence protects it from the eyes and hands of those who look into its cockpit and under its hood. It is not possible to get closer to Corvette racing technology. Several vintage competition cars are also here, including the '57 SS and the L88 racer that won Le Mans' over-five-liter class in '72.

In and around the Heritage tent is the '67 Astro I, the '68 Astro II XP880 and the alumi-num-bodied '69 EXP040. Though not a race car, the '90 CERV III is here too,

and it's worth noting how design elements that appeared radical 13 years ago found their way into the C5.

While plenty of C5s are around, most late-model Corvette fans have one eye on the future. Anticipation is high for the next-generation Corvette C6 slated to debut in January at the Detroit auto show. Corvette chief engineer Dave Hill is pressed daily for details about the car—details he keeps close to the vest. "The progress we're making on the C6 is feeling really good now," he says. "We've built all the prototypes and we're refining and perfecting them. It's coming along great."



Hill is more forthcoming on the success of this Corvette cluster. "It's really wonderful," he says with a smile. "To see all of the enthusiasm and comradeship around this car is just fantastic. I don't think there's a car company in the world that wouldn't be happy to trade its customers for the enthusiasm of ours."

These words ring true as a gentleman crawls beneath a black and gray '56. He just has to see how perfect it is. Not far away, the National Council of Corvette Clubs accepts voter ballots for its People's Choice car show. There are at least 100 NCCC members' cars here, and each seems to have a legitimate chance to win—especially a Sebring silver '63 split-window coupe. Ask owner John



With an example of every Corvette model-year on hand, Chevrolet's 50 Years exhibit proves to be a *Vetterati* favorite.

Meadows if he would consider selling it, and he says, "Actually, I'm giving it away." Pardon? "I'm giving it to my three-year-old grandson when he turns 21. This is what I call a 'keeper.'" That it is.

The Caravan parade heads through downtown Nashville and it's time to claim a prime-viewing street corner to watch the cars roll by. Each participant seems to relish the spotlight, but one driver in particular catches the eye. Pilgrim rolls a yellow Z06 to a stop and looks at the motorcycle cop stationed to his left. A slight smile forms on Pilgrim's lips. He cranks the revs up and pops the clutch. Screeeeech! A couple-thousand-strong crowd goes wild. The cop

laughs. "Unbelievable," someone mutters.

Not really. With this much love in the air, even the police are blind.



Cubic-riches: There's more to see than time allows, but big displacement always brings smiles.

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