

# Hot Rod Heart

Most folks restoring 1957 Corvettes aim for originality. Jim Koscs and Bill Erdman find someone who didn't.





Jack Beckett figures that probably nine out of ten people approve of his modified '57 Corvette. Still, there's always that one incredulous observer who enjoys pointing out incorrect bolts, switches, and other details—and in classic-Corvette circles, that guy is the most vocal. Still, Beckett makes no excuses for his modified Corvette, which was indeed built from an honest-to-goodness '57 platform. By Beckett's reckoning, retaining the classic shape while adding the reliable powertrain, precision handling, and safe braking of a modern Corvette was the best way to enjoy his car.

Corvette purists have a particular soft spot for the 1957 model, which offered V8 grunt and a healthy list of performance options in a slick European-inspired package. The '57 Corvette represented a significant step up for Chevrolet on the global sports-car stage, which had been relatively unfamiliar territory for American car-makers up to that point. With sales totals that nearly doubled the previous year's numbers, the 1957 model also helped to solidify the Corvette's spot in Chevrolet's lineup. In the early years of Corvette production, any particularly slow-selling season could have spelled the end for the entire brand. With considerable history-fueled collector interest in today's classic-car market, few owners are willing to alter their 1957 Corvettes in any way—in fact, many thousands of dollars may be spent to remove previous modifications of just this type and return the cars to their original specification.

For Beckett, the temptation of actually *driving* his stylish roadster was strong enough to override the prevailing showroom-restoration trends. Since completing his '57 project, Beck-

ett has driven the car on trips from his home in New Jersey to upstate New York and Ohio. He's subjected the car to the gravel-strewn Interstate. He's braved shopping-mall parking lots. He's even been caught in that watery substance that occasionally falls from the clouds.

Though regular use was always in the cards, Beckett didn't specifically set out to modify the car from stock. After spending some time in one, however, the thought of making some updates quickly began circulating in his mind. "I had a '57 when I was in high school and I guess I had forgotten how badly it handled," he laughs. While the reality of drum brakes, manual steering, and trucklike suspension can be sobering to any '57 driver, Beckett's overall impressions were further seasoned by the condition of his particular car at the time of purchase. Somewhere along the line a previous owner had cut out the original chassis crossmember to make room for a set of ladder bars for drag racing—predictably, this move didn't do much for structural rigidity. To make things even worse the custom job was never finished, leaving the '57 in an unfortunate situation where it lacked both originality *and* day-to-day usability.

Despite the Corvette's mangled underpinnings, the 283 cubic-inch engine ran reasonably well, and Beckett spent some time driving it as-is. And, while doing his best to enjoy the ill-handling car, he mulled over his options. The first and most obvious choice was restoring the car to factory-stock condition—this route would prevent purist backlash, and the money spent on restoration





Above: Lowered stance and bright, flawless surfaces leave little doubt this '57 has been customized; stock restorations never look quite so liquid and shiny.

Far left: Modern serpentine belt and electric cooling fan open up space around the mildly warmed-up 350.

Below left: Billet 18-inch rims left plenty of space for oversized aftermarket rotors, but factory C4 discs already gave substantially better stopping power than the four-wheel-drum setup originally delivered.



could be at least partially justified as a returnable investment. But, as Beckett soon realized, the chopped-up frame was a major obstacle to a showroom-stock restoration. To make everything right, thousands would have to be spent on rebuilding the frame, and the end result promised to be only marginally better in terms of real-world usefulness. By Beckett's logic, as long as good money was being spent fixing the car, it might as well be going towards improving drivability.

This line of reasoning steered him toward a modern replacement frame, ideally one that allowed for updated suspension parts, brakes, and steering hardware. After shopping the various aftermarket frames Beckett settled on a full tubular spaceframe, *a la* 300SL, from SRIII Motorsports in New Lenox IL.

SRIII—a name inspired by owner Mike Stockdale's interest in the Corvette-based SR2 specials—has been in the early-Corvette frame business for more than a decade. The firm's first chassis was built when Corvette-show promoter Ken Hanna hired Stockdale to make a tube frame for his own '57. Since then SRIII

has built more than 150 first-gen replacement frames, expanded the catalog to include C2 frames, and offered special-order chassis that allow the use of C5 suspension in early Corvettes. According to Stockdale, "Most guys start with a very rough car, but I've had customers buy really good donor cars for \$50K. The advantage of using the better car, of course, is avoiding having to restore a basket case, which can turn out to be more time-consuming and more expensive."

The SRIII chassis is a classic spaceframe, much stiffer than the original C1 part and designed to accept C4 suspension and brake components. The C4 bits bolt directly onto the SRIII chassis, allowing for various different wheel and brake packages. Beckett settled on 18-inch Budnik wheels wrapped in modern 235/50ZR18 rubber. Though the updated rollers might be another strike against Beckett's car in the eyes of purists, the larger footprint is critical to utilizing the chassis improvements. Though some replacement frames allow the use of C4 transverse leaf springs, this particular SRIII unit was designed to accept

