

Trend Watch

By Jim Koscs



The Volvo C70

Race to the [Hard] Top

New Crop of Hardtop Convertibles Starts Under \$30,000

One of the perks I enjoyed while working in the Mercedes-Benz USA public relations department in the 1990s was driving the brand's cars for product familiarization. Being a musclecar buff, the high-powered AMG models stand out. But one Mercedes I drove attracted attention like no other ever did – the two-seat SLK roadster.

Priced at \$40,000 when introduced for 1998, the SLK probably would have been a hit no matter what, since it cost about half as much as the brand's SL two-seat dreamcar. But the SLK offered something found on no other roadster, not even the SL of the time – a retractable hardtop. Wherever I drove the SLK, people asked me to demonstrate the top. Male, female, retiree, teenager – it didn't matter. It seemed that everyone had heard about the SLK, and everyone knew about its very special roof (thanks to our great PR work, of course!).

The intricate – and even entertaining – motion of the SLK's retractable hardtop roof rendered any other convertible roof as merely ordinary. When raised, it made the SLK as snug and quiet inside as a closed coupe, a notable improvement over many soft-top convertibles.

The SLK's hardtop convertible roof was not a new idea in 1998. Peugeot had built a limited-production model some 60 years before, and Ford famously offered the first mass-produced hardtop convertible, the 1957-1959 Skyliner. The Ford was a full-size, six-passenger car. Known by most auto buffs simply as “the retractable,” the Skyliner was seen as something of a novelty model even then. Its complex top system made the car more expensive than the Ford Sunliner soft-top convertible, and when lowered, the top itself severely limited luggage space.

Interestingly, prior to the Ford Skyliner, General Motors had coined the term “hardtop convertible” for its upscale postwar coupes from Buick, Oldsmobile, and Cadillac. These were true hardtops – meaning no center pillar for an open, airy feeling. Inside, they even featured chrome bows in the headliner to mimic the look of a convertible with the roof raised. It was a somewhat elaborate – but popular – charade.

GM's “hardtop convertible” idea proliferated through the 1950s and likely inspired Ford to offer something unique. So it was no surprise that Ford's Skyliner advertising would take a shot at the GM cars: “How can it be a hardtop *convertible* if the top doesn't go down?”

In the Volvo's case, the retractable hardtop not only broadens the model's appeal, but can also help improve profitability. . .

Ford sold fewer than 50,000 Skyliner models in three years. In the 1950s, that was considered a “failure.” Today, marketers would call it a “niche.” Some four decades after the Ford Skyliner, Mitsubishi explored that niche with a hardtop convertible version of its 3000 GT sports car. But that was a limited-production model, costing some \$62,000 in top-line VR4 trim (twin turbo, all-wheel drive), an eyebrow-raising 50-percent premium over a comparable 3000 GT coupe model. Just over 1,600 were built in the three years it was offered, 1994-1996.

continued...

The SLK arrived as the Mitsubishi 3000 GT Spyder departed, and Mercedes-Benz followed the success of the SLK a few years later with a retractable hardtop for its flagship SL roadster. And naturally, the second-generation SLK introduced for 2005 continued with a retractable hardtop.

Lexus introduced its luxury hardtop convertible, the SC 430, in spring 2001, pricing it in between the Mercedes SLK and SL. The new Lexus was ostensibly a four-seater, although its rear seats offered almost no usable legroom.

Cadillac, seeking to re-enter the luxury two-seat market after its 1990-1993 Allante, also chose a hardtop convertible roof for the \$78,000 XLR. The Chevrolet SSR, a unique neo-classic-styled convertible pickup, also sported a retractable hardtop roof, but proved less popular than hoped and went out of production last March after 24,000 were made over three years.

Jaguar is bucking the trend by offering separate coupe and soft-top convertible versions of its second-generation XK8 model. But those other luxury “retractables” have inspired a trend that is spreading quickly into more affordable segments – and with more seats!

Pontiac just introduced its new G6 retractable hardtop convertible starting at \$28,490, and Ford has re-entered the retractable category with a new C70 model from its Volvo luxury brand. Priced about \$10,000 over the Pontiac, the new Volvo C70 replaces the previous C70 coupe and C70 (soft-top) convertible models, sharing only its name and turbo 5-cylinder engine with them.



Now you see it ...



... and now you don't. The Volvo C70's three-section roof neatly disappears beneath a rear-opening trunklid (see page 4 photo). It's like two cars in one for under \$40,000.

In the Volvo's case, the retractable hardtop not only broadens the model's appeal, but can also help improve profitability for the manufacturer, which needed to develop just one model instead of two.

This fall, Volkswagen will join the growing number of hardtop convertibles with its new Eos model, expected to be priced in the same “under \$30,000” neighborhood as the Pontiac G6 convertible. Named for Greek mythology's goddess of dawn, the Eos will debut with the same 200-horsepower turbo 4-cylinder engine used in the VW GTI

and Audi A3, with a 250-horsepower V6 model arriving later. And the Eos has yet another trick up its sleeve – a sunroof! So, you get a choice of just how much of the outdoors to let in.

Ford recently introduced its own hardtop convertible version of the Focus – but in Europe, not for U.S. consumption. The European Focus is a different car than the American Focus and actually shares its platform with the Volvo C40 models, on which the new C70 hardtop convertible is based.

Car buyers in Europe and Asia can choose from even more hardtop convertibles that will likely never be imported to the States – including Japan’s diminutive Daihatsu Copen and Mitsubishi Colt CZC, and in France, the little 206 “CC” model from Peugeot, the company that started it all in 1938.

While the hardtop convertible trend bears watching, it’s also safe to assume that many convertibles will keep their soft tops, especially sports cars like the Honda S2000, Mazda MX-5 (Miata), Pontiac Solstice and Porsche Boxster, where light weight is a priority for optimum performance. ■

Jim Koscs comes to Dealer Principal with 20 years of automotive writing and public relations experience. He left the Mercedes-Benz USA public relations department in 1999 to start AudaMotive Communications, Inc., which provides public relations, marketing and speech writing services for auto industry clients. A lifelong musclecar buff, Jim is also Feature Editor for Mopar Action magazine. You can reach him at 425.939.0475.

Addendum: In my previous column, I mentioned that Pontiac had cancelled plans for a successor to the recently cancelled, Australian-built GTO. I also said to hope for a reversal on that decision – and General Motors did just that, about a week later! A new GTO will return in about two years, built on the same platform that will also bring the Chevy Camaro back.



Pontiac brings the joys of a hardtop convertible into the sub-\$30,000 range with the new G6 convertible. Base power is a 201-hp V-6, and a GTP model features a larger, 227-hp V-6.