

The MIDLIFE CRISIS convertible

As the world speeds by, why chase after it in the family van? **Larry Weisman** drops the top, pops the clutch, and uncovers the philosophy and fun behind owning a sports car when you can finally appreciate it.

NICE WHEELS. WHATCHA DRIVIN' THERE, BUDDY? "Why, it's my new midlife-crisis convertible. Six-cylinder engine, 300 horsepower, six-speed manual transmission." Few items are so readily identified with a man's—and sometimes a woman's—aging process as a sports car. It's the subject of endless jokes (see above), some of them funny (sorry, look elsewhere).

Maybe it is a symbolic recapturing of youth. Or perhaps it's a function of economics, in that a person 45 or older can afford a flashy vehicle that might previously have outrun the budget.

"The closer your age gets to the federal highway speed limit, the more you actually want a car that goes over that speed limit," says Robert Thompson, a professor of television and popular culture at Syracuse University. "We'd like our age to keep going down, but maybe we compensate by hoping our speed goes up."

There's more than speed involved, though, when Pops pops for premium fuel, massive horsepower, and sunshine on his balding dome. There's control. For folks in their 50s or 60s, change has arrived in the form of grown children, retirement, and a lessened sense of self as the world speeds by.

"There's a continuum in the phenomenon of someone slowing down wanting a car that indicates they are in fact not slowing down," Thompson says.

No more station wagons filled with soccer players or garden equipment. No more SUVs. A ragtop and the open road sound awfully appealing after decades of tending to the requirements of the brood.

"I've always done things that are practical. Growing up with a family and kids, I did what the family needed: the minivan, the four-door car. I've also done what made sense for the family," says Fred Rosen, 43, of Burke, Va. "And I had this opportunity to buy a commuting car, and to do this for me."

Which he did a little over a year ago, nabbing a used 2007 BMW Z4. Rosen doesn't call it a midlife crisis, but he gets the joke. "But my wife and I have been talking, and I do like vanity plates," he says. "We're playing with something to make up the words for midlife crisis."

"You can't generalize and say everybody driving around in a sports car is trying to get in touch with their ego, but I still think there's a lot to that," says Matthew Donahue, who teaches courses

on popular culture at Bowling Green State University. "People do view the cars they drive as a statement about them. You don't see a lot of successful people driving around in junker cars."

The car holds a special place in the American heart. Independence, swift movement? Sure, that's part of it. Think of that famous Thunderbird heading

west on Route 66. See the USA in your Chevrolet. Lowriders. Beaters. Jalopies. And the speedy, sporty, shiny carriages. They connote youth, life, and fun.

So just get in the car. Driving is more fun. The wind in your hair (or what's left of it). The open road. The chance to show off.

"It's a portable symbol of who you are. If it's a cool automobile, you bring that coolness wherever you go," Thompson says. "If you're 60 years old and you live in a really great house, you can only show that off to your neighbors and people who you're close enough to have invited to come there. If you're 60 years old and you've got a smokin' hot sports car, you can show that off to whomever you want by simply driving around. It's why the car is the ultimate status symbol: It's completely portable."

"The closer we get to 65 or 70," says Syracuse professor Robert Thompson, "the more we want a car that can actually go faster than that."

Not everyone is so susceptible to impressing, or keeping up with, the Joneses. Donahue finds himself unmoved by such desires.

"The advertising gives the illusion that you are what you drive," says Donahue, who drives a 1988 Oldsmobile "with dents all over the place."

Maybe it's not showing off so much as satisfying that longtime yearning for the wheels that hooked the heart long ago. People in their 50s and 60s, with other financial obligations finally behind them, may decide to scratch that 350-horsepower itch.

"I've sold a lot of Corvettes over the years to people who grew up with them and couldn't get them then, but can now," says Kirk Faett, a salesman at Sterling (Va.) Chevrolet. "Sometimes it's a 50th birthday, a retirement, or just 'a gift to myself.' A lot of people dreamed of it, but couldn't do it with the family and all the responsibilities. And now they can."

Andrea Biller, an attorney in Irvine, Calif., bought a black-on-black Corvette in 2006, when she was "fiftyish." She'd had her eye on one for years. With her son and daughter both in medical school and her career in high gear, the time was right.

"I had always wanted a Corvette," Biller says. "I'm not really a car person, but it was one of the three cars I could recognize on the road. It's a sexy car."

Hmm. In her 50s, a good salary, children gone from home. It sure sounds like Biller made a you-know-what purchase.

"It wasn't a midlife crisis. You just can't do it when you're a mom with kids," Biller says. "I always wanted a Corvette, thought about it for 20 years. It fits in the time frame of the midlife crisis of guys at 45, but women are slower. I needed a new car, that's what I wanted to get, and I

could afford it."

Purchasing power counts. Sex appeal is right there as well. Thompson sees those chips on the table, and he raises it one. For teens, driving is one of the first markers of freedom from parental supervision, and that theme evolves endlessly. So the car may be more midlife indicator than crisis, welcoming its owner to another stage of life.

"First it was independence from your parents, now it's independence from your kids," Thompson says. "It may be that after two decades of driving minivans or station wagons and having your entire driving regimen determined by all these other people, that middle age is sometimes a time where you've got more options financially and practically."

The three stages of man: Freed from parents by driving, freed from children and driving them around, and then loss of driving privileges in later life due to infirmity. You might as well look good during that final transition.

"When people get older, they're able to afford the car, and the vehicle of choice is some kind of sports car because it gives them this illusion of grandeur," Donahue says. "People do view the cars they drive as a statement about them."

Maybe it says they have money. Maybe it says they have taste. Maybe it says they're just not done yet ... at 70 miles per hour.

"I sold a man his first Corvette when he was 82," Faett recalls. "I sold him a second one when he was 86."

As *Houston Chronicle* auto writer Tim Spell observed, Corvettes "are high on the list of cars symbolizing the quest to recapture youth."

We all laughed at the little old lady from Pasadena. Go, Granny, go. But Granny went, and she went in style. ■

Your perfect ride

Yearning for a sporty car? Got a few bucks put away? Here are a few fun rides that will cushion the midlife crisis and eat up some highway (and those savings) in the process.

Mazda Miata

A classic two-seat convertible, with either ragtop or hardtop. The two-liter engine provides plenty of zip, with a cabin spacious enough for a roadster. The trunk is large enough to hold bags for a weekend getaway. **MSRP from \$23,190**

Porsche Boxster

European flair, especially hot in classic red. Options will push the price up quickly. Base model offers a 2.9-liter V-6 that produces 255 horsepower. Great on the open road, but the ride can be harsh. **MSRP from \$48,100**

Chevrolet Corvette

The American muscle car has a 6.2-liter engine that makes 430 horsepower. Not a refined ride, but a recognizable one with a distinctive roar under the hood. Thunderous fun. **MSRP from \$49,525**

Ferrari 458 Italia

Options could push the price up another \$100,000, but who's counting? The V-8 makes 562 horsepower, moving this 3,325-pound baby from zero to 60 miles per hour in three seconds. **MSRP from \$230,275**

“God love the car. It has shown the naked heart that lives in all of us. Man invented the car but the car—out of pure malevolence no doubt—changed the history of the world by reinventing man.”

Harry Crews, author of the novel *Car*, in which the protagonist attempts to eat a motor vehicle piece by tiny piece