

**Y**OU KNOW, this whole story might not have happened if the principle characters had been from, oh, let's say California, where everybody is supposed to be so mellow and laid back. But they were all from Texas, and trust me when I tell you that real, down-home Texans, as opposed to your nouveau-Texan transplant types, are very much 'fool me twice, shame on me' kind of people. Like most people with genuine Southern backgrounds, real Texans are not generally wired up to tolerate a great deal of crap.

So when Ferrari racer and Texas oil man Gary Laughlin wrecked the crank on his Testa Rossa at a late-'50s SCCA event, he was alright with dropping by Italy on a Middle Eastern business trip to buy a replacement. He was borderline alright with paying the then eye-watering sum of \$350, too.

He was considerably less happy when the crankshaft eventually got to the States, with Enzo's buddies taking their cuts along the way, and the price had gone up to \$1200. Gary knew good and well that any Chevy dealer would sell you a crank that handled just as many horses for a touch over 50 bucks, and probably deliver it to your house for free to boot; hell, Gary was a Chevy dealer.

From such a situation have often floated dreams of combining cheap, ample American V8 power with classic European coachwork. Gary Laughlin, however, had the money and connections to take a serious run at it. Fellow Texas Chevrolet dealer Jim Hall was a co-conspirator, as was future legend Carroll Shelby, and surely General

Motors would love something like that in its line-up as a nice little image builder, right?

With Shelby's influence in Detroit, they convinced the right people at Chevrolet to slide three 1959 Corvette chassis out the side door before the bodies went on, and, during one of his trips through the Med, Laughlin hooked up with Sergio Scaglietti to produce finished automobiles. It's said that Sergio never laid a line on paper when he built cars, he just eyeballed the panels as the shop beat them out, but his stuff was impressive: impressive enough for the Ferrari works down the road, and that's what our boys were after. That, and a decent interior with some American-sized leg room for Grand Touring, and a bit less weight than the clunky fibreglass GM version, so the cars had a chance on a racetrack.

What happened next depends somewhat on your point of view. Scaglietti did take 18 months of shrugs and excuses to crank out the first unit but, come on, we're talking about Italian cottage industry building cars by hand in the 1950s: what else could you expect? And the fit and finish was a bit less than Laughlin had anticipated, but then this was essentially a prototype.

Sergio probably should have arranged something for sorting out the handling, though: he'd lopped about 400lb off the weight of a standard Corvette and made no suspension adjustments. The rear tyres would break loose in a shuddering heartbeat, the chassis went all squirrely on hard upshifts, and at high speed the front end was as unstable as a cokehead with a borrowed credit card. After all the time, money and trips to Italy, Laughlin was starting to grow weary of the venture. >>

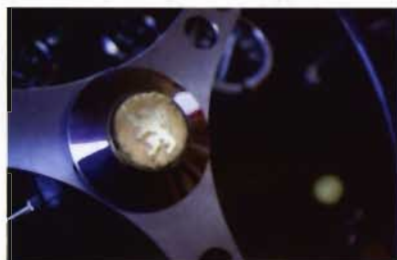
Small-block Chevy V8 and Italian styling: what could possibly go wrong?

# BLUE-COLLAR ARMANI

Words: Dale Drinnon Photography: Martyn Goddard







**Left and above**  
It's all-American under the bonnet – sorry, hood – but the interior is pure post-war Italian Grand Tourer.

Sadly, the killer blow was still to come. American manufacturers, under serious safety-lobby pressure, were officially in a no-motor-sport phase, and, despite enthusiasm from Chevy division, senior GM execs had no use for the car whatsoever. Carroll Shelby remembers well when *The Word* came down: 'I was living in Italy at the time – the cars were at Scaglietti about three-quarters done by then – when I got a call from [Chevrolet general manager] Ed Cole at Zam saying forget the whole thing. He had got his ass chewed out by GM management and been told to drop the project.'

The other two cars were finished and shipped to Houston, and that was that. Jim Hall took one and kept it for quite some time. Carroll Shelby didn't: star drivers earned a lot less than car dealers back then and the 'Shelby car' was sold off promptly. Gary Laughlin had had enough of the whole mess and sold his, the first built, in fairly short order as well.

Which is rather a shame, because it turned into a pretty good automobile once the kinks had been worked out. Bud Lyon purchased Scaglietti Corvette Number One in February 2007 because he liked the concept ('I'd called Alex Finigan at Paul Russell and Company looking for a Cunningham C3, and he said "I think I know something else you'd really appreciate..."'); as he learned more about the car, however, he decided to make it truly



### 1959 Chevrolet Corvette Scaglietti

#### SPECIFICATIONS

**Engine**  
283cu-in (4638cc) 90-degree ohv cast-iron V8, Ramjet mechanical fuel injection by General Motors Rochester Products Division

**Power**  
315bhp @ 6200rpm

**Torque**  
305lb ft @ 3800rpm

**Transmission**  
Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive, GM Positraction limited-slip differential

**Suspension**

Front: independent via coils and twin wishbones, telescopic dampers.  
Rear: live axle, leaf springs, telescopic dampers

**Brakes**

Discs front, drums rear

**Performance**

0-60mph c3.5sec  
Top speed 135mph (est)

drivable and use it. While cosmetically restored in the '80s, it still needed the basic development work never undertaken almost 50 years ago. A long-time Paul Russell customer, Bud sent it to the firm's Massachusetts shop for some grooming.

In addition to dialling in the suspension – spring rates, damping and ride height adjustments, mostly – the model's Rochester mechanical fuel injection got a good deal of attention. This was the only one of the three cars so equipped in the beginning, although the others were subsequently converted to Rochester from their original four-barrel carburetors. An interesting choice, that, as early fuelie Chevys were such a pain to keep tuned that some were changed to carbs from sheer frustration. Randy Elber, the clever and depressingly young technician working on the vehicle, had never touched a Rochester injection before, but he had Mercedes Gullwing experience and plenty of patience.

Bud wanted a front disc brake conversion as well, a wise decision with a 0-60mph time of less than six seconds, and the brakes were upgraded to incorporate a dual-circuit master cylinder at the

'LAUGHLIN  
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SCHMOOZE GM  
MANAGEMENT'





**Above**  
Any similarities with a 250TdF are doubtless purely intentional; Enzo was reputedly not amused.

same time. The car now also has heating and demisting, at long last. If the heater controls look familiar, they're from a Healey 3000, which seems to please Healey owner and photographer Martyn Goddard no end as Randy and I circle around the car.

'We had to do some basic rebuild work, too,' Randy is telling me, and the professional disdain in his voice is virtually palpable when he says: 'Somebody had welded the front camber adjusting nuts up solid. And we rebuilt the rear end. But everything else we did was strictly bolt-on; everything could all go back the way it came, no problem.'

The car's Scaglietti bloodlines are obvious during our circling. The final shape was more or less left to Sergio; there's a lot of his 250 Tour de France in there and I doubt anyone complained. I'm not so sold on the combination of TdF nose and Corvette grille, though, but the grille is something Laughlin specified on the first car, hoping to schmooze GM management. The interior is equally hybridised: the tee-handle-released parking brake and floor-mounted headlamp dip-switch are pure '50s family Chevrolet; the door panel hardware, upholstery and wrinkle-finish dash could be from any Italian GT made after the war.

Heading out for some road photos, it doesn't take long to remember why so many European exotics used to end up with small-block Chevys, and the 283 was maybe the best ever. It is

smooth and revvy, and Randy has the injection tuning spot on: perfect manners and good progressive power from fire-up onward, no fuss at all. The four-speed gearbox that is unique to this example (the others originally had automatics) matches the engine perfectly: it's slick, and I suspect the synchros would stop a cannonball in mid-air.

On the downside, thanks to the stiff steering, huge turning radius and Positraction diff you need a 40-acre field to turn this rig around, and with blind extremities it would be a brave soul indeed who attempted parking exercises at close quarters. The Texans did get their full quotient of leg room, though, and the elbow room isn't to be sniffed at either; too bad Sergio didn't throw in an arm rest for those long American highways.

And when you give the thing its head, it runs like a scalded dog. The engine just makes gobs of power, the suspension puts it on the ground, and boom, you go down the highway, trailing a sexy V8 rumble. Still, fast road is a lot different from even slow track, and you have to wonder if the live-axle, leaf-spring underpinnings could ever

have lived up to Gary Laughlin's lofty dreams.

As Bud Lyon says, 'I tell people it's an absolute jewel outside and a bucket of bolts inside. After all, it's still a 1959 Corvette underneath.'

'THE SMALL-BLOCK CHEVY IS SMOOTH AND REVVY: PERFECT MANNERS AND PROGRESSIVE POWER'

Thanks to owner Bud Lyon, to Paul Russell and Company, Massachusetts, USA, [www.paulrussell.com](http://www.paulrussell.com), and to Carroll Shelby.