

Convertible Trans Ams and Z-28s

... and the sunshine shall go boldly where no sunshine has gone before.

One of the interesting things about being on the staff of an automotive magazine is watching people's reactions to the cars we drive. We use test cars as we would our own automobiles, and it is a rule of thumb that the more unusual, exotic, or expensive the car, the better time we have with it. Stories about such cars are also easier to write.

This particular one began when Joe Molina, a PR man with an instinct for the unusual, walked into our offices one afternoon with a photo album in hand. Molina has an impressive list of high-dollar specialty-car manufacturers as clients. Every time he shows up, he brings us something startling. From the aura of excitement he radiated, we knew that once again he must have latched onto something spectacular. As he began

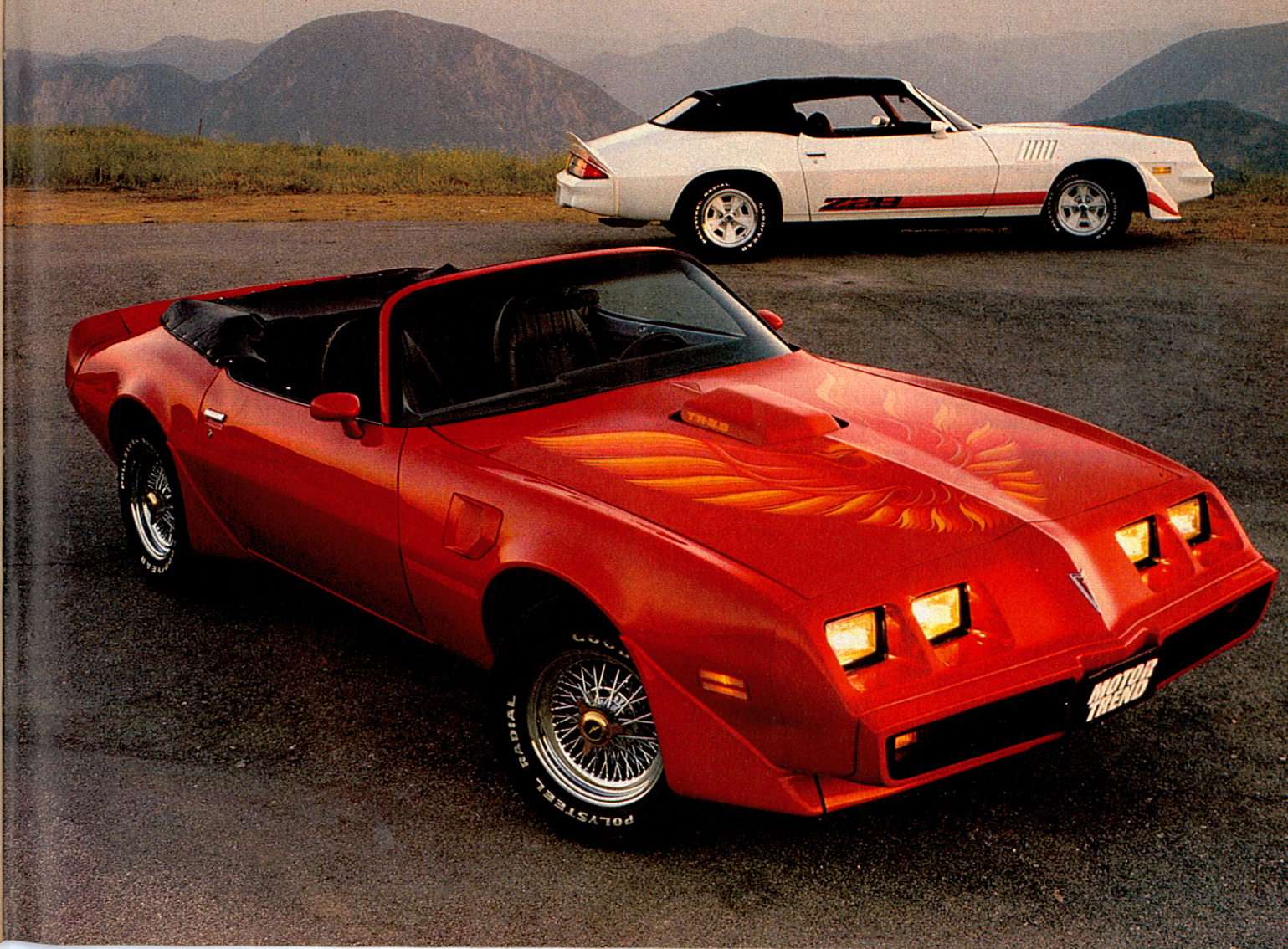
by Peter Frey

turning the pages of the album, we saw pictures of, of all things, convertible Trans Ams and Z28s. Molina accompanied the show with his monolog about how he came to represent the folks who built the cars and what hot sellers they would be. We agreed, but we also had reservations. During research for the Mustang Indy Pace Car cover story (January 1979), engineers from Cars & Concepts (the Detroit-based firm that constructed the vehicle and the prototype T-top) let us know how difficult it is to apply a major structural change to a vehicle and have it perform as it did when stock. We also had questions about the sealing out of wind noise and rain. So, Molina agreed to bring over

four of the cars for us to inspect.

Two days later we stood before the small group of cars in four different color combinations: a red Trans Am convertible, an all-black TA, a yellow Formula and a white Z28 with red interior. The photographs had not done justice to the real things.

The people involved in the project accompanied the automobiles. They took us on a tour through their creations that erased our doubts about conversion quality. They pointed out specially constructed braces bolted underneath the cars that would take care of chassis flex. The braces tie the front and rear subframes together, which their creators claim, "... produces a chassis that is as stiff as, or stiffer than, stock." We then saw a photograph of



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part of the conversion process that involves welding contoured pieces of sheet metal into the gaps left when the roof is cut off—this also to have a stiffening effect. As to our worries about wind noise and rain seepage, we were told that windows are sealed with a fabricated B-pillar piece, complete with weather stripping, that has a hinge at its base. When the top is up, it swings up and locks into the framework. When the top is lowered, it and the hinged pillar are covered by a vinyl “boot” that snaps into place. The top is of a high-quality sailcloth such as that used on Mercedes and Rolls-Royce convertibles, and has a guarantee of 12 months or 12,000 miles. It is manually operated—which means you raise and lower it by hand—but it was easy enough to do, with just a slight awkwardness because of its size.

It was then time to see if we would be as impressed by these cars on the road as we had been simply by walking around them parked in our garage. We are happy to report that we were. The chassis bracing did what it was intended to do, putting handling on a par with a non-chopped-up stock car. The ride was a bit harder, but it was impossible to tell if it was an effect of the chassis bracing or the fact that convertibles are a few hundred pounds heavier. With the top down, there was none of the wind buffeting in the cockpit that is so annoying in some convertibles. With the top up, the interior was comfortably free of wind noise.

The creation of these convertibles was the result of a chain of events that eventually brought together the idea and the people with the necessary money and technology. The principle players were Gary Forbis, an automotive fabricator; Chuck Hindmarsh, a genial salesman with a history of dealings with the wealthy; and Chuck Hill, an automotive wholesaler who could afford such an endeavor.

Their story began in 1976, with Forbis and Hindmarsh becoming friends

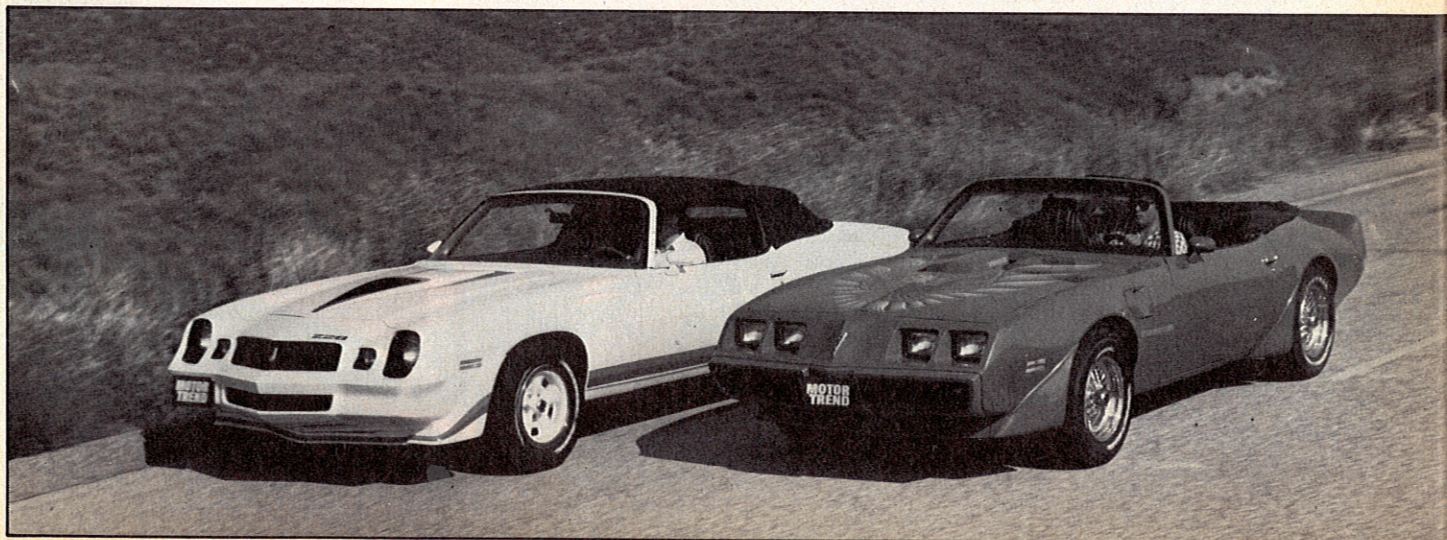
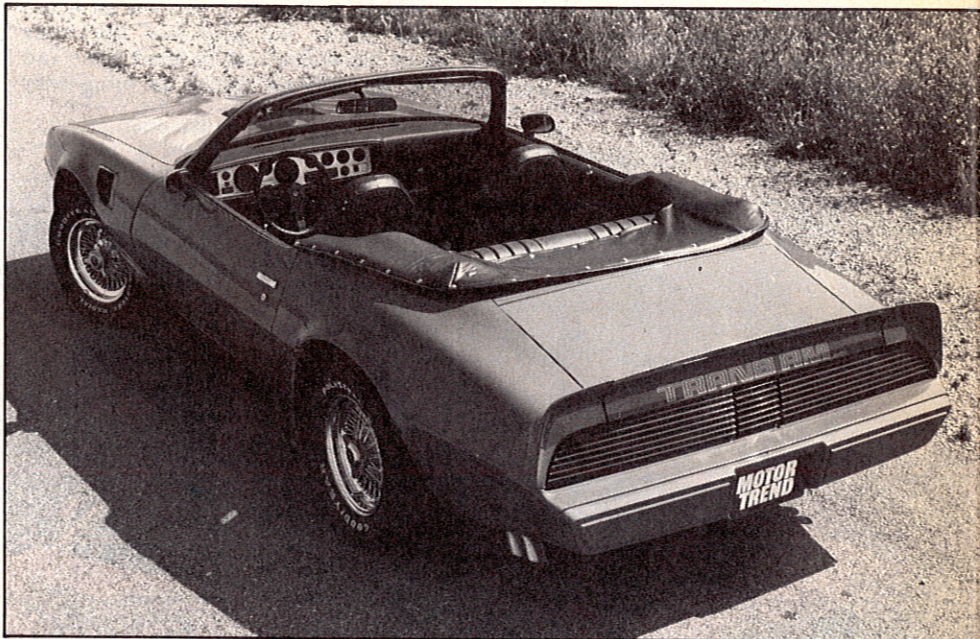
while they worked for a customizing company. Forbis left and moved to Port Sanilac, Michigan, where he formed his own company. Hindmarsh left soon after and went to work for one of the largest custom houses in Detroit. One day, Hindmarsh just happened to answer a ringing telephone. He found himself speaking to a representative of the Saudi Arabian Embassy in London who wanted to know about having a Lincoln Town Car transformed into a convertible 4-wheel-drive hunting car for the king. Hindmarsh was told by the president of his company that they weren't interested; so, he decided to build the car on his own. He called Forbis and was assured that the project was within his capabilities. The Arabian arrived the next day with a list of specs and a 50% cash deposit.

The project resulted in a professional association between Forbis and Hindmarsh, and a contract to do several other vehicles for the royal family. The company, originally called Gary's Auto

World, became National Coach Engineering, with Forbis doing the building and Hindmarsh doing the selling.

Hindmarsh was at the Kruse Classic Car Auction in Newport Beach, California, with a Continental station wagon by Forbis, when it caught Chuck Hill's fancy. After much price haggling, Hill bought the car. He then invited Hindmarsh to his home base in San Jose to discuss an idea he had. Hindmarsh relates, “When this guy told me he wanted to build convertible Trans Ams and Z28s, I told him he was crazy, that nobody would buy cars like those. He was convinced there was a market for them and asked how big an order it would take to get us to build them. I told him it would take 175 cars to make it worth our while. He said, ‘Okay, build ’em.’ And here we are.”

The end of his story coincided with our pulling back into the garage, and with an exchange of business cards and handshakes, they departed, leaving behind the red T/A for us to drive. That



same evening, on the way home from the office, our Trans Am seemed to be a celebrity, unable to avoid drawing attention to itself. We pulled up to a stop-light next to a brand-new Corvette. The driver was obviously proud of his machine. He glanced over at our red convertible and, after an instant's shock, turned stony faced. He stared straight ahead trying not to look over at us. The light turned green, and inching our way through rush-hour traffic, we found

ourselves again side-by-side at the next stop. Suddenly, he leaned out his window and said, "I'll give you this car and five thousand dollars for yours."

Over the next couple of days, we received a string of similar stares and comments and, in one case, witnessed a pedestrian in a crosswalk who stopped in his tracks and began applauding.

The construction rate for these convertibles is about seven per week. Forty-two cars have already been sold.

They are available, by prior arrangement, with a variety of factory color combinations and optional equipment. Suggested retail prices are \$16,500 for the Z28 and \$17,500 for the Trans Am, but dealers have reported sales as high as \$19,000. The prices are exorbitant, but when compared to the going rates for other custom conversions, they can be considered reasonable. The cars are distributed through two sources: Chuck Hill's Autowest/American Clout, 446 S. Winchester, San Jose, California, and Tom Roulette Pontiac/Cadillac, 104 Mentor Ave., Painesville, Ohio.

As if we had any doubts about our car's appeal, it was Chuck Hill who later told us about the man who had come in to take a test drive in one of the convertibles. He was gone for 15 minutes. When he returned, he was grinning ear to ear. "I just drove down Main Street," he said, "and people were wavin' and whistlin' and hollerin'. I felt like a movie star. And all for only \$320 down and \$320 a month."

My

