

CLASSIC DRIVER

Chevrolet Corvette: Certified for space travel



What does a man used to 6.3g acceleration drive to the shopping mall? Well, in the case of astronaut Alan Shepard, the first American in space, it was a Chevrolet Corvette.

The former US Navy test pilot (not bad credentials) made the brief suborbital journey in May 1961, only weeks after Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin had become the first person in space and to orbit the Earth. When not behind the controls of the latest Grumman, McDonnell or Vought fighter - let alone the Mercury-Redstone 3 rocket - Shepard's daily driver was a 1957 Chevrolet Corvette.

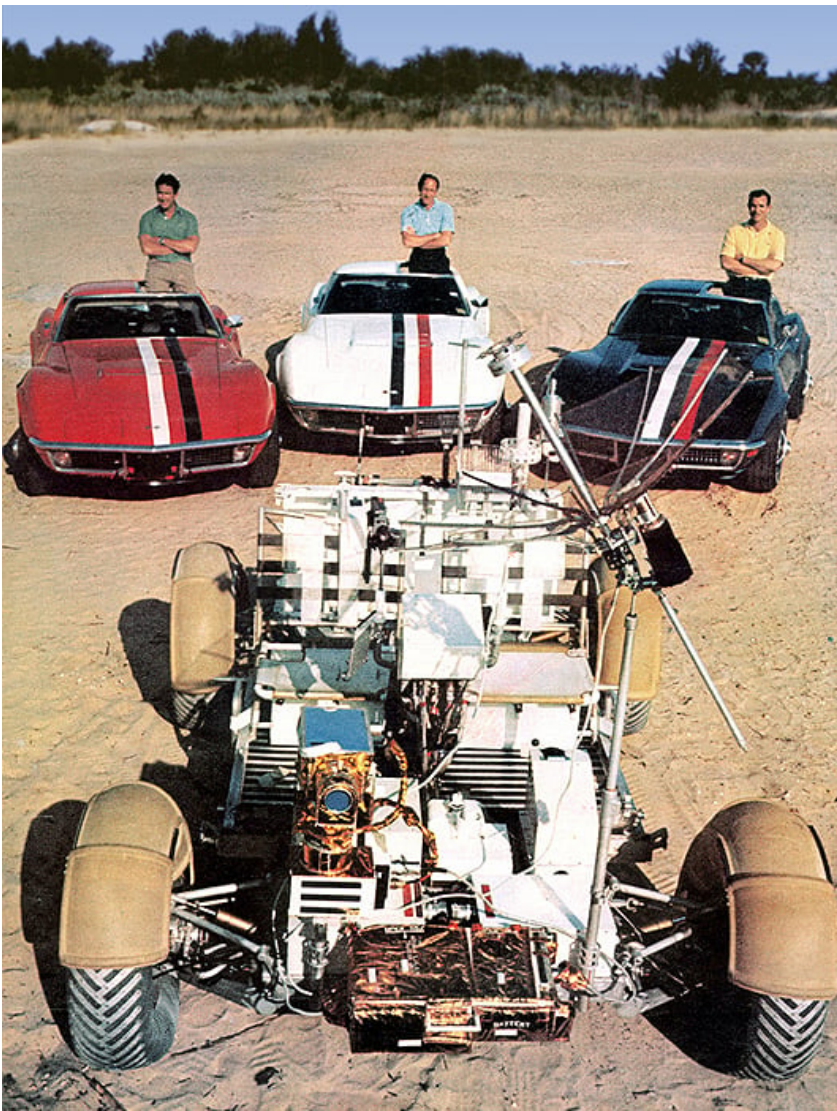
It was one of 10 he would own in his lifetime, helped by friends in high places, no doubt - the then GM President, Ed Cole, presented the American with a new 1962 Corvette soon after the event. Later, local Cadillac/Corvette dealer (and Indy 500 winner) Jim Rathman was to offer astronauts on the space programme Corvettes at very good leasing rates.

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Six of the seven Mercury astronauts took up the offer with only John Glenn (the first American to orbit the Earth) deciding, we assume, that the sports car was a little too fast for him, preferring a more staid Chevrolet station wagon.

The space programme's top pilots' fascination with Corvettes continued when Apollo 12 astronauts Alan Bean, Dick Gordon and Charles Conrad ordered made-to-measure, gold/black 427ci Stingray coupés – a combination penned by Bean himself.



And in 1971, to celebrate the flight of Apollo 15, its astronauts David Scott, Alfred Worden and James Irwin commissioned three more Stingrays, this time in patriotic red, white and blue. The June 1971 cover of LIFE magazine shows the trio alongside their space-age SUV, [the LRV \(Lunar Roving Vehicle\)](#).

It didn't end there, since the association was celebrated time and again in celluloid, with many appearances including the 2009 film *Star Trek XI*, which opens in the year 2245 with a 12-year-old James T. Kirk driving a 280-year-old 1965 Corvette Sting Ray.

The Chevrolet Corvette clearly had The Right Stuff.

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Text: [Steve Wakefield](#)

Photos: GM

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