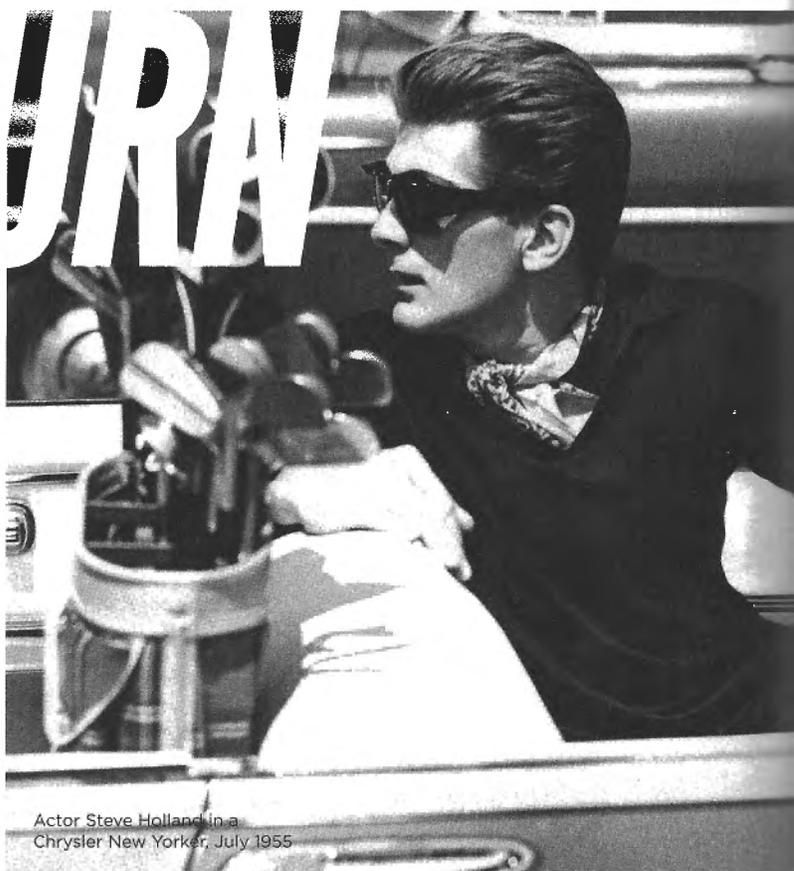
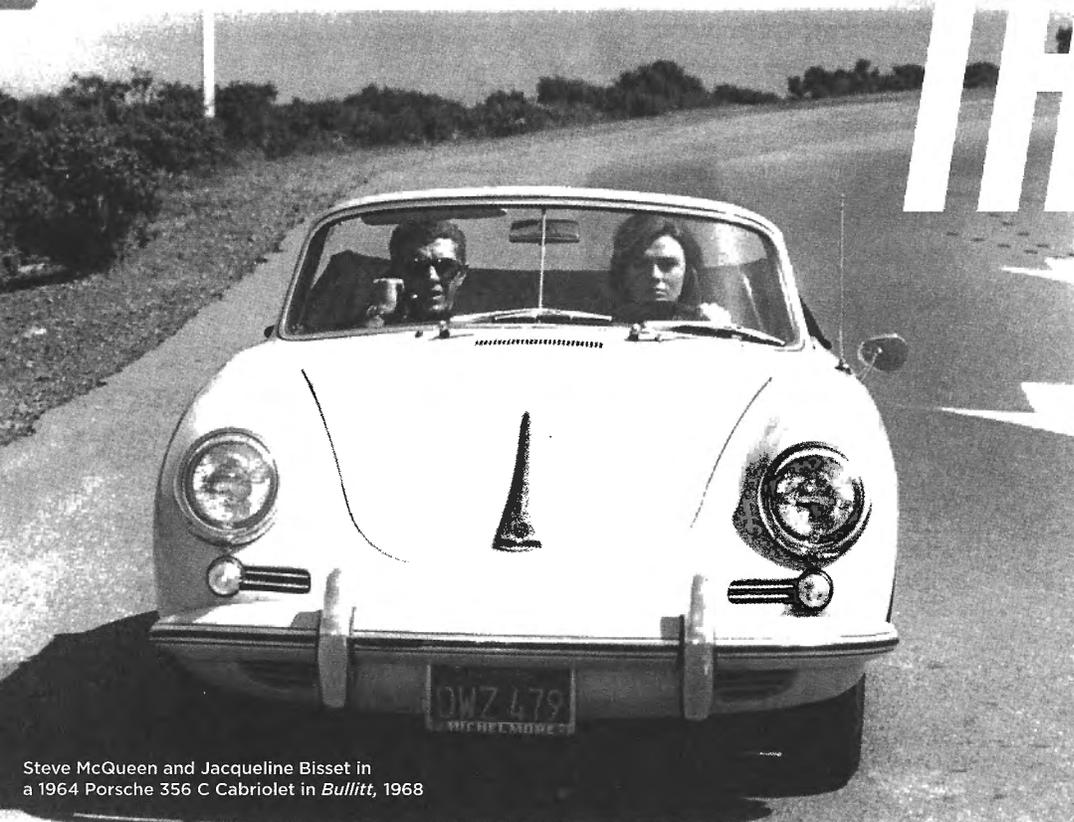




James Dean with a Porsche 356 Speedster, 1950s



Actor Steve Holland in a Chrysler New Yorker, July 1955

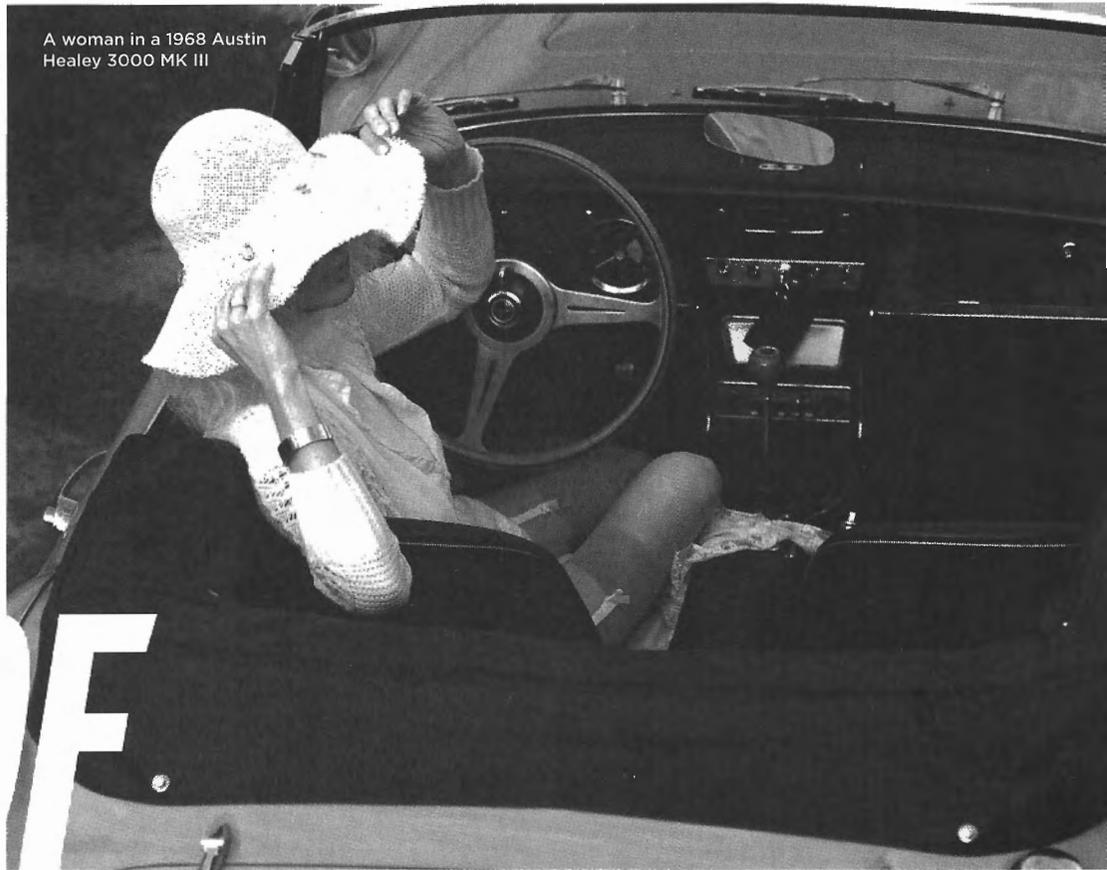


Steve McQueen and Jacqueline Bisset in a 1964 Porsche 356 C Cabriolet in *Bullitt*, 1968

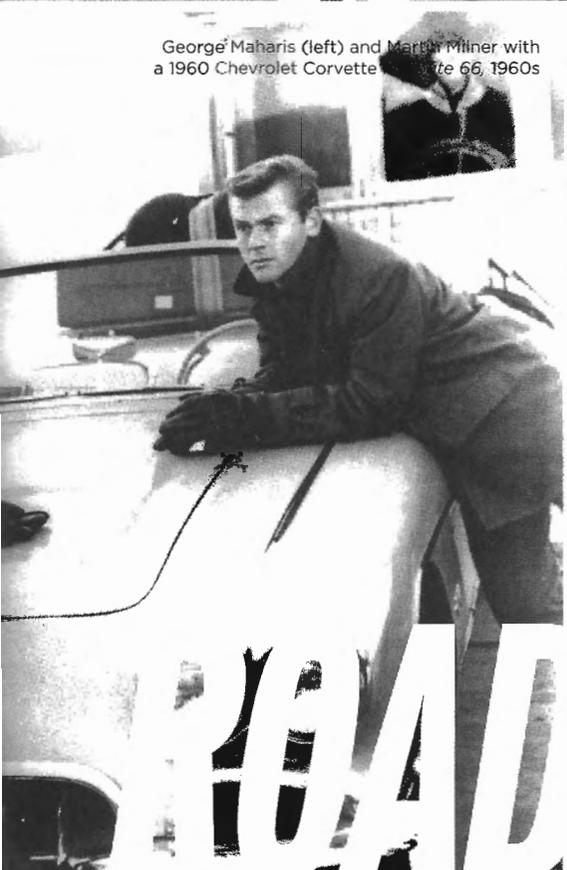




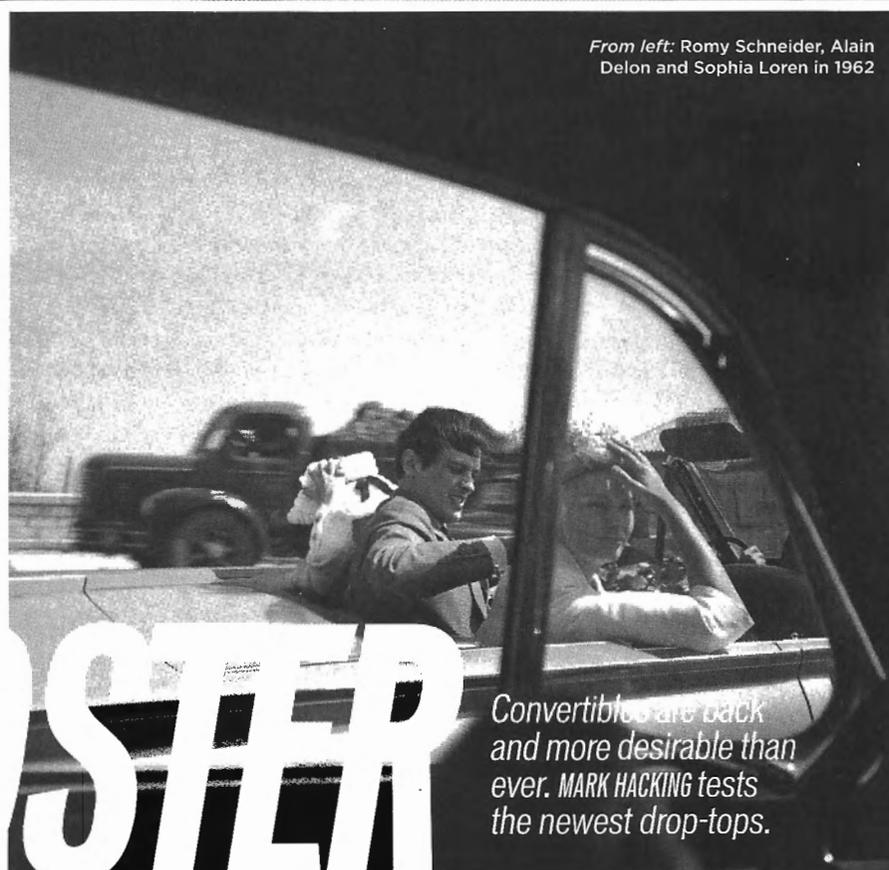
A woman in a 1968 Austin Healey 3000 MK III



OF



George Maharis (left) and Martin Milner with a 1960 Chevrolet Corvette and a 1966 Ford Mustang, 1960s



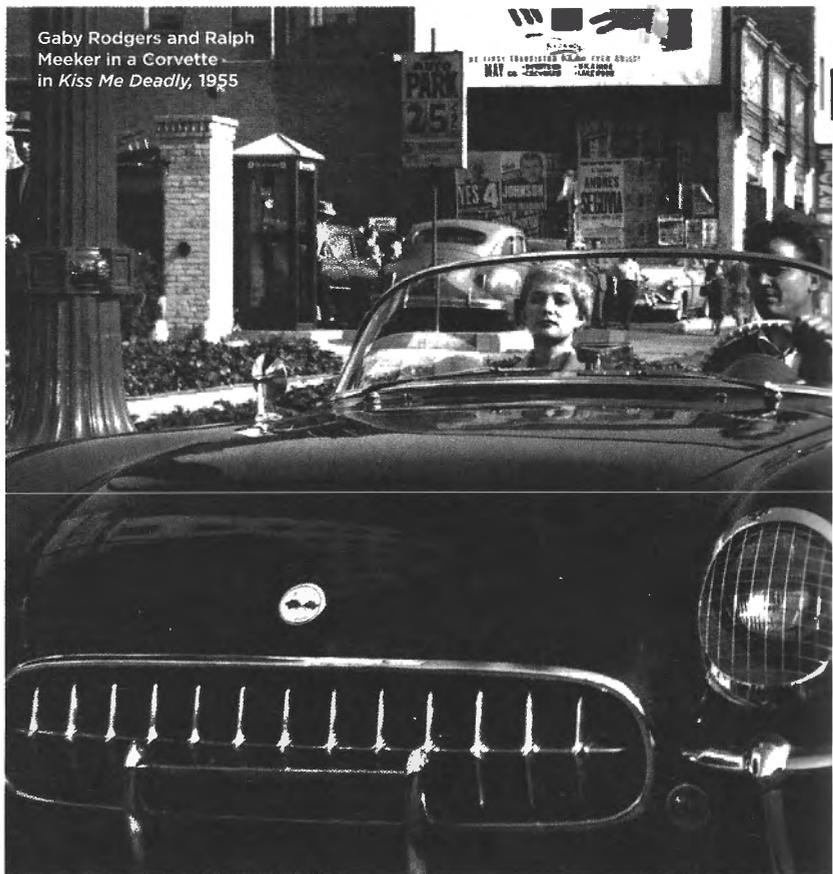
From left: Romy Schneider, Alain Delon and Sophia Loren in 1962

ROADSTER

Convertibles are back and more desirable than ever. MARK HACKING tests the newest drop-tops.



Actress Mamie Van Doren with a Jaguar, 1954



Gaby Rodgers and Ralph Meeker in a Corvette in *Kiss Me Deadly*, 1955

THE CONVERTIBLE

has been around since time immemorial. Well, not quite. But during the earliest days of the automobile, open-air motoring was actually the preferred form of transport—closed-roof cars were not as popular or prevalent. Over the past century, the drop-top rose and fell in popularity according to the style of the times and other mitigating factors, including international conflicts, fuel prices and ever stricter crash-protection requirements.

The convertibles of old demanded a fair amount of compromise on the part of their owners. Depending on the model in question, you could generally count on a noisier, more wind-buffed cabin, a vastly less-water-resistant roof and poorer driving dynamics as compared with the hardtops of the day.

As a result of these factors, at one point in time, sporty convertibles nearly vanished from the face of the earth. In the 1970s, people grew increasingly dissatisfied with the unreliability of British and Italian roadsters from the likes of Triumph, MG and Fiat—not to mention their almost complete lack of versatility.

The car generally credited with renewing modern-day interest in the roadster, the Mazda Miata, debuted in 1989 and has since gone on to become the best-selling two-seat convertible of all time. The formula behind the Miata was brilliant in its simplicity: lightweight chassis, front engine, rear-wheel drive, independent suspension, manual transmission, manual soft-

top—*finito*. It represented sheer driving pleasure pared down to its essential elements.

Other manufacturers took notice: The Miata taught them that the joy of the drive still resonated—and they resolved to remove all the hurdles preventing people from choosing to extract that joy from behind the wheel of a convertible.

Chassis were stiffened to compensate for the loss of structural rigidity. More effective sound-deadening materials were added. Innovative wind deflectors were invented. The quality of the soft-tops was improved. Better climate-control systems, heated seats and heated steering wheels were introduced to encourage top-down driving even when the weather didn't merit such a choice. And, in some cases, the soft-top was dispensed with completely in favor of a more modern solution, such as the foldable hardtop.

So while the roadster has never really left, it's also come back stronger than ever. This year alone should see the release of soft-top versions from some genuine automotive icons, including the Chevrolet Corvette Stingray Convertible and the Porsche 911 Turbo Cabriolet. We may also see the latest supercars from a pair of staunch Formula One rivals—the McLaren MP4-12C Spyder (confirmed) and the Ferrari F12 Berlinetta Spyder (possibly).

But to truly honor this unique form of automobile, we present driving impressions of three convertibles that are already burning up the highways and byways. This exclusive trio represents a potent recipe of heart-stopping performance, commanding design and mind-blowing gadgetry.

FROM LEFT: LEOHIS DEAN/THE LIFE PICTURES COLLECTION; GARY WOODS/THE LIFE PICTURES COLLECTION



speed limit. Fact is, the Bentley is incapable of traveling at 15 miles per hour, and as soon as we took to the vast expanse of two-lane blacktop that seems to stretch on forever across the Arizona desert, everything seemed right with the world.

LAMBORGHINI AVENTADOR LP 700-4 ROADSTER

The Lamborghini Aventador LP 700-4 Roadster is too fast for public streets—so fast that it could well be branded a menace to society. The latest super sports car from the Italian manufacturer is also very wide and very loud, so it's best driven on a completely open, entirely unpopulated and decidedly unsupervised stretch of tarmac. In these types of surroundings—we were fortunate enough to have Homestead-Miami Speedway at our disposal—the Aventador shines like a diamond.

The 6.5-liter V-12 engine howls like a scalded banshee, full of sound and fury, signifying everything. The all-wheel-drive system propels the rocket-shaped Lamborghini forward like (you guessed it) a rocket ship. And the E-gear automatic transmission shifts with such ferocity, you may feel compelled to call your chiropractor after each session behind the wheel. (The Lamborghini Aventador LP 700-4 Roadster is many things; subtle it is not.)

While the V-12 generates a prodigious 700 horsepower (hence the nomenclature), it also boasts cylinder deactivation technology and an automatic start/stop system that combine to cut fuel consumption by some 10 percent. Any way you slice it, this is a nice touch and a prime example of having your gelato and eating it too.

In raw terms, the Aventador completes the run from zero to 60 miles per hour in three seconds flat and has a top speed of 217 miles per hour. (As mentioned, it is too fast for public streets.) Bonus points: With the removable carbon-fiber roof panels shed and stored in the admittedly cramped front trunk, the Roadster is even more stunning than the hardtop version.

JAGUAR F-TYPE

The 2014 Jaguar F-Type is the first all-new two-seat roadster to be released by the British marque in more than 50 years. This car was a long time coming, especially when you consider the legendary Jaguars of the past, such as the SS, the XK and the everlasting E-Type.

While there are no illusions that the F-Type will sell thousands upon thousands, that is not its *raison d'être*. Instead, this roadster has been tasked with becoming the new halo car for a brand seeking to reengage with its roots in racing.

Fortunately for die-hard Jaguar fans, the F-Type is a supremely engineered sports car that connects with drivers in a way that few vehicles can. Available in three distinct models—the 340-horsepower V-6 F-Type, the 380-horsepower V-6 F-Type S and the 495-horsepower F-Type V-8 S—this exhilarating roadster ticks all the right boxes when it comes to sheer seat-of-the-pants performance.

The steering is precise and precisely weighted. The suspension strikes an inspired balance between comfort and composure at high speeds. The quick-shifting eight-speed automatic transmission and braking system are, quite possibly, the best of their kind on the market today. The exhaust note is a symphony of mechanical sound. And the thing is drop-dead gorgeous. ♦

BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GT SPEED

There's something deliciously simple about the premise of the Bentley Continental GT Speed—it's the world's fastest four-seat convertible. What could be simpler than that? What could be more enticing than being able to take three of your closest friends, colleagues or loved ones for a high-speed ride along some vast stretch of open road? Answer: Not a whole lot.

The base version of the Continental is appealing enough as is, but when you add the increased performance of Bentley's Speed line of vehicles and cut off the top, you've got something that borders on the mythical. Power comes from a thundering, twin-turbocharged W-12 engine (yes, "W") that develops 616 horsepower and 590 foot-pounds of torque.

The Bentley is an all-wheel-drive vehicle, so much of that power and torque ends up hitting the ground running, propelling the GT Speed Convertible from zero to 60 miles per hour in just a tousled hair over four seconds flat. The car's terminal velocity—202 miles per hour—is the cause for its claim of being the world's fastest convertible.

The drive experience encompassed a genuine slice of Americana: Beginning in Phoenix, our small cadre of cars ventured—tops down and snow tires fitted—to the chilled south rim of the Grand Canyon before heading west along historic Route 66 to Las Vegas.

We got stopped for speeding while going, ahem, 28 miles per hour, though, for the record, this was nearly twice the