

A Cavalier Attitude

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What Drives Passion for a Car That's Utterly Middle-of-the-Road? Its Cult Holds the Key.

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Somewhere out there is the very last Chevrolet Cavalier -- a tin-can testament to American mediocrity -- that was ever built. Maybe it's in the back of a rental-car lot in Pittsburgh, sitting there like a lost dog in the rain, hoping a little old lady will pick it up and take it home. We just don't know.

This is because when the last one rolled off the line at the [General Motors](#) plant in Lordstown, Ohio, in 2005, the good people who'd been paid \$18 or \$20 an hour to build 5 million of them over the past two decades didn't really care. It came off the line and went off to die at some dealer's lot. It was one of the most mundane cars ever built.

Now, for reasons that defy the Divine Order of the Universe, there is a subculture of guys who adore it. Who create [Cavalier](#) Web sites and Cavalier car clubs and Cavalier chat rooms. It's like starting a fan club for a lawn mower.

"A cultural phenomenon," says Edward Loh, a senior editor at Motor Trend.

The Cavvy wasn't even bad enough to be a joke, like the AMC Gremlin, or a kitschy embarrassment, like the Chevette. It was just the cur of the compact rental fleet at the Airport at the End of the Mind, the joyless perk of the junior sales exec, the [Motel 6](#) of the American automobile. By the late 1990s, the company was reportedly losing \$1,000 on every one sold.

It was "the car that deservedly got GM in trouble," says Paul A. Eisenstein, publisher of the Car Connection, a popular automotive Web site.

"The drive is memorable because it was the worst we've experienced in recent memory," according to Edmunds, one of the most respected auto analysts, in an online review. Edmunds said the Cavvy was "homely." The engine shook "like a caffeine addict going through withdrawal." And: "Road noise is present at all times." And: "The seats are uncomfortable for any length of time."

Something is going on here, something on the darker edge of American possibility, something scary in the back aisles of [AutoZone](#). Why would teenagers, young men, all in search of hipness, devote themselves to such mediocrity? Surely they are strange young men, which makes them sort of just like us, so we like them right away. We think maybe they are a particular type of American antihero: young men in search of Available Glory. This is a sense of unique identity, of art, of self-expression, that might be found within the bounds of your paycheck.

We happily set out to find them. We called Brian Armstead, co-host of "Autosense," a talk show on XM radio. He covers hip car stuff. We said we're looking for Chevy Cavalier car clubs.

There was a pause.

"Are you messing with me?"

Nope.

Pause.

Brian?

"A *Cavalier* car club? I never heard of *any*-- the Cavalier ? That's like a club for uh, uh, a *Vega*." He says the last as though he had to spit.

He says to try Ron Pemberton at the Unity Thunder Car Club, based in the D.C. area. They've got really great rides; sportscaster [James Brown](#) is a member. They love Chevys.

Punch punch punch buttons, phone rings, introductions.

Ron, we're talking about the Chevy Cavalier here, and --

"The Cavalier?" He laughs. HAHA.

He says he's never had a call about a Cavalier. "Muscle cars, [Corvettes](#), [Camaros](#), Chevelles, those are the top ones at Chevy. I thought that was what you were calling about."

And then:

"The Cavalier, man? Really? HAHAHAHAHA!"

Unexpected Power

You know what?

Cavalier guys *love*

this. Go ahead, yuk it up. They'll take a used Cavvy for five grand and get in the garage and turn it into something that'll shame your 20 grand store-bought [Civic](#), or anything else you saw in "The Fast and the Furious."

"When I drive by, I want people to look at me and say, 'Wow, that's a Cavalier,' " Josh Detorie is saying.

Detorie's got a cleaning rag, and he is working it over his maxed-out Cavvy. He's tall and lanky and soft-spoken and has reddish hair cut short and a wispy beard and is 23 and is smoking a cigarette. The evening light is going in the apartment parking lot in Towson, Md. He and the car have been together since 2004; he

and Anna Hutson, his fiancée, have been together about that long, too. They have a daughter, Zoe, who will be 2 this summer. Zoe, she's toodling around on the sidewalk. Detorie and Hutson and Zoe and Detorie's mom and her lady friend who drives an Orkin truck all live in an apartment one floor up. It's a garden apartment complex with a pool.

"Most of the people who drive muscle cars, yeah, they say stuff about the Cavalier. I say that muscle cars are built the way they need to be. This is something to get new power out of. It's fun in the process. You do it all yourself."

He won something like a dozen trophies at car shows last year, but mostly minor stuff. He wants to get "to the next level," where you can be like in the top 10 and win \$300 or something. The car shows are great. You talk cars all day, get ideas from other rides, then go back to the hotel. A guy in his car club, his girlfriend has a stripper pole. They set that up and see if you can hold your body out sideways. Beer pong is popular.

Detorie works maintenance at Sunbelt Rentals, a place where you can rent backhoes and tractors and things. He wears a work shirt with his name stitched on the right pocket, putting in six days a week. He's at work at 7 a.m. He never knew his dad and was raised by his mom and her parents. He packs his lunch.

Hutson is 24 and works at a day-care center.

"I'm in the potty-training room. It's ridiculous." She's sitting on the curb painting her toenails.

"Everything has to be perfect with me. I have to look cute when I go out. Perfect. He probably told you that."

Detorie had in fact not mentioned that. His head is under the hood. He's tweaking wires to the throttle position sensor.

The car is candy-blue and silver. It's gorgeous.

"I have a couple thousand pictures of my car from what it looked like when I bought it until now. It wasn't blue and silver originally. It was black and silver, but the black got to be so much to keep up with. Oxidation kicks in a lot faster. I was working so much I wasn't able to keep up with it."

He produces several hundred pictures of the car on his [iPod Touch](#).

He's reworked just about everything but the taillights. His Web page lists more than 50 modifications. Tires upgraded four sizes. New suspension. A GM performance supercharger under the hood. A 1,200-watt [Sony](#) amplifier. Flat-screen television in the trunk, television monitors mounted in the visors. Racing seats. Custom-made sliders. Triple engine gauges, like eyeballs, on the driver's side of the dash. Neon blue lights under the car and inside, too; it lights up like the control room of an aircraft carrier.

Of course it has remote start.

Josh hits that and the car rumbles to life, deep-throated and ready. Friday night. They're going up to the mall so Hutson can get her nails done. She says she doesn't chew them if she gets them done. He has on the shirt for his car club, Team VI, which has all types of cars in it. He and one other guy have Cavvies.

This shirt has his name on the pocket, too, only it got messed up, and they put his name and type of car on the same line.

It reads, "Josh Cavalier," as if it's his last name.

The Cav Cult

The Cavalier was once the best-selling car in America, and that alone makes you wonder whatever happened to this country. It was 1984 and 1985. It was priced to sell -- like, for \$14,000. It came in a three-door hatchback, a four-door, a coupe and a convertible. There was the Z-24. The car was updated three times over the next 13 years, and then GM lost interest. It died in 2005.

There is no real national organization to the Cavvy phenomenon.

There is a J-Body Organization out of Arizona (named for GM's framework for the Cav, the Pontiac Sunbird and such), and Clubcav.com and V6z24.com and the Cavalier page at Cardomain.com. The latter has more than 9,000 Cavalier owners listing their hyped-up vehicles -- more than any other car except the Camaro, which is, like, a real car.

It's big in the Midwest.

"It's more like a cult than a membership thing," says Mike Baker, a 20-something graphic designer and president of Team VI. He is working with a Scion, but counts himself "a Cavalier man."

People think this is funny.

You should see the scorn on Web sites, in chat rooms:

"Why would any man want a Cavalier in the first place? And if that's what you have, why would you want to make it . . . embarrassing by tuning it?"

"My '95 Buick LeSabre beats Cavaliers."

On StreetFire.net, where guys post street-race videos, there's one of two Cavaliers going side by side down a highway, and the guy with the camera pans over to the speedometer and shows them doing . . . 105 mph.

"This is the slowest race I have ever seen," writes one poster.

Sneer if you want. Cav guys don't care. They shouldn't. Amping up a homely ride is American Romantic, like [Bruce Springsteen](#), only older.

A quick history of customized cars in pop-culture America:

After World War II, GIs came home with a little money in their pocket and a new sense of working with mechanics. Out in Southern California, they bought old beaters, mostly from Ford. Like a '29 Model A Roadster, or anything after '32 with the flathead V-8. Something wasn't right with the engine but, hell, they could fix that. Get out the tools, ratchet, ratchet. Honey, crank it when I tell you to. Right. Give it some gas. Good. Good. Slam hood, wipe hands on a rag. Take it out on the strip and turn the quarter faster than anything else alive.

The hot rod was born out of reworked junk. That was part of the glory of it, the great young male joke on respectable society.

America at mid-century, a sense of all things possible, a sense that nothing was really real.

Keeping Out of Trouble

Sunday afternoon, a day off. Detorie's in the garage at his grandparents' house. It's overcast and windy and

bleak, and the cars are hissing past on the multi-lane roadway out front.

It's his dream space. A hydraulic jack. Spare bumpers, boxes, parts, a 60-gallon air compressor in the corner. Meguiar's detailing sprays and polishes.

"Chevy Cavalier SS," he's spraypainted on the wall. Also "Zoe" and "Anna."

Inside the house, Detorie's "Pa," the grandfather who raised him, "never had nothing."

Joe Salzman tells you this without bitterness. He left school in the sixth grade to work, pumping gas in Upstate New York, helping the family pay the bills. He's standing in the living room, lots of pictures of the kids on the walls. He's in his 70s and still works six days a week, 2 in the afternoon till 10 at night, at the post office, overseeing the vehicle maintenance unit.

"When I was coming up, it was just work, work, work. Nowadays, all these kids are so far into drugs and alcohol. The car, it keeps him out of all that. He works, and he works steady. He doesn't have that drug and alcohol problem, and that means all the world to me."

It's Salzman who has bankrolled almost all the modifications on the car.

He and his wife, Ruth, like having the boy close. Ruth lost her daughter, Belinda, in 1973.

She was fine, just fine, then started to get really tired. Leukemia. She was 17, and her hair started falling out with the chemo. She was in the ground the next year.

Guts. Work. The kids. The roadway out front of the house. Here is what has been earned, or what God has allowed. A sense of Sunday afternoon, the quiet.

Limited Possibilities

Detorie pulls out a few minutes later, candy-blue Cavalier rumbling, the body four inches off the asphalt. His car club meeting is outside I-695, the Baltimore Beltway, in the parking lot of Lucas Brothers Flooring. It's right behind a [Dunkin' Donuts](#). By the time darkness falls, maybe 20 cars and guys are standing around, hands in pockets against the chill, shadows on the pavement, it's all about Available Glory and the American car.

Detorie has his blue neon lights on the Cav, the doors open, talking, laughing, smoking. Sunday night, work looming tomorrow morning, the outer suburbs, a place in America where everything seems so real and so little seems possible.

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