

# **Maestro: Bill Mitchell and the Iconic Cars of GM Styling**

## Chapter-1: The Boss



Roy Lonberger

# Preface:

## Roy Lonberger

### William Leroy Mitchell:

Bill Mitchell (WLM) was the most outrageous and profane man I have ever met. He was a larger than life character who ruled his kingdom by style, swagger, and results.

His success record was unmatched: He was responsible for the design of vehicles that sold 136,000,000 cars during his twenty year reign as VP Styling/ Design. He elevated GM sales to number one and moved Chevrolet to almost 60% of the market place. He singlehandedly saved the Corvette. He created some of the world's most iconic automobile designs.

While others try to take credit, he was singularly the driving force behind many GM iconic cars: Corvette, Camaro, Riviera, Toronado, Monza GT&SS, Astro, Mako Sharks, Manta Ray, Stingray racer, and the AeroVette.

Without Bill Mitchell, these cars would never have existed.

### Personal Style:

Flamboyant, egocentric, direct, passionate, abusive. Love him or hate him, he was a force to be reckoned with. He suffered fools rarely. Not for the meek or thin skinned, either you were with him or you did not exist. He scared the living hell out of you if he disagreed with your work, but he would shower you with perks if you showed that you loved cars as much as he did.

He never took no for an answer and always found ways to navigate political intrigues and governmental regulations. Tenacious like a bull dog, he would outsmart adversity and turn a creative spark into a reality.

His secret: He hired the best designers, gave clear direction, delegated responsibility, but never abdicated his own. He was responsible for everything that went out the door and he ruled with an iron fist to make sure everything met his standards. As a result, he created some of the best cars ever designed. He was the designer, the fighter, the mentor, and the leader.

In a world of gray suits, he made things happen with unique flair, creativity, taste, and timing.

### Leadership:

He led by example and made every designer expand their skills and explore things thought impossible. Never afraid to try new things, he stretched the envelope. You would show him one concept, and he would demand another dozen. And in doing, he made good designers into better designers. I always found him fair and direct. And almost always right about design.

He loved cars with unique character, expressions of power and motion, and extreme proportion. In a world of bulbous shapes, fins, and chrome, he introduced shear surfaces, clarity of line, and absence of chrome. Though he was an accomplished artist, he rarely took pencil to paper; instead, he motivated his designers, barked commands, bent reality, used his force, injected humor, and sometimes threatened violence:

WLM managed his creative team like the conductor of an orchestra, waving his arms like a baton, demanding excellence, and achieving the results of his vision.

He was the **Maestro**.



### Roy Lonberger

*As Head of Bill Mitchell's secret Studio-X during the mid-1960s, I had an up-close and personal look at Bill Mitchell and his design passion that created Corvettes, Camaros, mid-engine Corvettes, Rivas, Toronados, El Dorados, race machines, and show cars.*

*My story is about Bill Mitchell, the Maestro, his design greatness, and the business management of creative designers. And it is about how Mitchell shaped my later career after GM as the CEO of Magna Design, an international design, engineering, and corporate identity firm.*

*And of course it celebrates the proof of his leadership: **The Iconic Cars of GM.***

***“Change the product every year if possible...create customer demand.”***

*Alfred P. Sloan, Jr.*

# 1958 Stingray xp87

Alpha-Omega

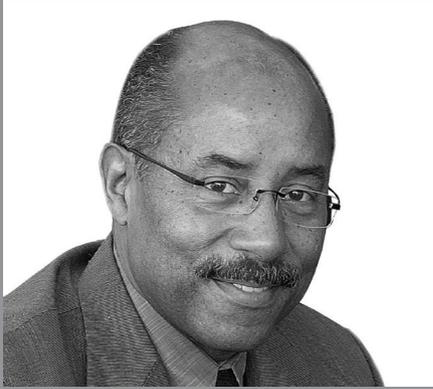


**Design: GM Styling, Bill Mitchell, Robert McLean, Bob Veryzer, Chuck Pohlman, Gene Garfinkle, Norm Neumann, Larry Shinoda, Tony Lapine, Peter Brock, Research Studio-B**

Digital Illustration: Roy Lonberger, Carol Johanson, Dave Koontz

# VP Design Talk:

## Mitchell's successors speak out



**Ed Welburn**

VP Global Design, 2004-2015

**Ed Welburn:**

*“There are many countless - and colorful - stories about Bill Mitchell.*

*I feel very fortunate to have worked for him during the last five years of his career at GM Design, although it seems like I worked for him much longer. That is because as a child, I was absolutely crazy about cars while growing up outside Philadelphia, and was a student of every Bill Mitchell design during that timeframe. Those cars were some of the most famous in automotive history, such as the 1963 Corvette Stingray, the 1965 Buick Riviera and Chevrolet Corvair Monza, the 1966 Oldsmobile Toronado, and so many more.*

*In addition to his inspiring leadership skills, most don't realize he was also an incredible artist. His paintings, both automotive and otherwise, were amazing.”*

Courtesy Ed Welburn, 2014

**Wayne Cherry:**

*“History has honored Bill Mitchell as one of the all-time great designers. With his flamboyant personality, and outspoken wit, he was one of the last larger-than-life superstars of the auto industry.*

*There is no doubt that Bill was involved in a number of vehicles that are considered all time design classics. I had very little interaction with Bill while I was a designer in the USA, but when I was overseas, on his numerous visits, I had more opportunities to get to know Bill and discuss the programs with him, also as we visited all the European motor shows. I felt very privileged that I was able to spend a lot of social time with Bill --overseas-- prior to his retirement.*

*I really valued the discussions we had, just the two of us, at that time.”*

Courtesy Wayne Cherry, 2014



**Wayne Cherry**

VP Design, 1992-2004



**Chuck Jordan**

VP Design, 1986-1992

**Chuck Jordan:**

*"I learned a lot working with Bill Mitchell.*

*This is an emotional business. The leader needs to have a clear philosophy and set design direction. Yes, he was tough and an aggressive fighter for creative design. The mediocre designers weren't crazy about this but the talented ones loved it.*

*When you're dealing with emotional creative people, you have to keep them stirred up and excited in a free environment. If they make mistakes, fine. You throw them in the waste can. We filled a lot of waste cans, but we also hit on some great ideas."*

Courtesy Dean's Garage

**Irv Rybicki:**

*"Bill Mitchell was a terrific boss. Very inspirational. He gave you a lot of room to move in—didn't hold your hand.*

*He was also very entertaining. When the room got quiet, he'd go into a one-man show. It was like you were in a theater on Broadway, and he would do this skit. It would have everybody in the aisles for a half hour, and it was a good lift. He was that type of personality. It broke the tension.*

*He was a good man to work for—no question about it. I can't fault Bill in any way, shape or form. He was fair, he was just, he gave the creative staff a lot of room, and he wouldn't sort out your work. When you did something, he'd put it up on the wall and say, "Let's have a look at them and then we'll decide what direction we'll take."*

*As he became more comfortable with his position and the people and their talents, he backed off and let them run it, which is, in my view, the proper way to do it."*

Courtesy Dean's Garage



**Irv Rybicki**

VP Design, 1977-1986

# 1968 Corvette C3

Production (1965-1966)



**Design:** GM Styling, Bill Mitchell, Larry Shinoda, Chuck Jordan, Hank Haga, Chevy-2 Studio, Roy Lonberger, Ira Gilford, David Macintosh, Jim Ferron, Dennis Wright, & Jim Bisignano

Digital Illustration: Roy Lonberger-Carol Johanson-Shane Baxley