

A bright orange 1966 Chevrolet Stingray is parked on a dark asphalt surface. The car is shown from a side profile, facing left. It has a glossy finish, chrome trim along the side, and distinctive five-spoke wheels. In the background, a body of water is visible with several wooden docks and a few small boats. Beyond the water, a row of houses with varying architectural styles, including some with multiple stories and gabled roofs, is situated under a clear blue sky.

A BLISTER IN THE SUN

Don Wagner's Tangelo Pearl 1966 Stingray turns a once-forgotten shell into a street-driven Pro Street showpiece.

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY TREY PALMISANO

NOT YOUR DADDY'S STINGRAY

On the off chance you get to see Don Wagner's Stingray up close and personal, you might be inclined to the reaction nearly every person showed who casually strolled past our public photo shoot and into the blinding sheen of the orange paint job - nostalgia, surprise, and a little envious tongue-wagging.

Grown men salivated as they explained to Wagner how seeing his car brought back memories of their own cars. Young men half his age, who grew up on nitrous oxide and Japanese tuners, approached Wagner, unimpeded by the formality of the camera, to shower him with praise. Be it a car guy, car gal, or neither, something was said, and from the expression on Wagner's face as he politely thanked them, you could tell he was more than used to the attention.

But then again, this isn't your daddy's Stingray. Neither is it a prim-and-proper trailer queen. That day, Wagner made the 40-minute trek down the coast from Delaware into Maryland in the Vette he planned on having photographed. This is a Stingray that isn't afraid of a little dirt or a long freeway rife with danger. And it's got a few dings to prove it - character marks, call them - small age spots that barely leave an imprint on the person taking in the view.

"This is a Stingray that isn't afraid of a little dirt or a long freeway."

Wagner regularly drives the Stingray to local car shows throughout the area. Not even the fear of large crowds turns his stomach. In May 2009, Wagner parked his Stingray just off the main strip in Ocean City, Maryland, where every year tens of thousands of cruisers descend on the nine-mile barrier-spit resort town to admire one another's rides. Swarms of enthusiasts of all ages encircled the car for a closer look. Wagner was as cool as could be, coming and going as he pleased and without an anxious care in the world.

This Delaware native's first experience with cars came at the tender age of 14, when his grandfather and dad bought him a 1955 Chevy stuffed with a six-cylinder engine. Since that time, he's owned quite a few cars, including a 1972 Corvette convertible. His restoration projects have included a 1962 Pro Street Vette and a 1956 Vette. Add two 1955 Nomads, a 1965 Malibu SS hardtop, and a 1965 Malibu convertible and his garage is busting at the seams.

As with any car, no two stories are alike. And this 1966 Stingray comes with a story all its own. In 2002, Wagner's intention was to find a car that he could restore to golden-age beauty. The shell that was to become his project vehicle was salvageable and had been rusting away, retired to a garage where another well-intentioned owner had hoped to resuscitate the aging beauty until life turned his attention in other directions.

Wagner's plans soon changed dramatically. "I never had a Pro Street car and this looked like a good candidate. Several days later I called and made an offer on the car. The owner changed his mind and the car was no longer for sale. Numerous days and phone calls later, we made a

deal. I finally purchased the car for \$6,500 in Rock Hall, Maryland," said Wagner.



Ocean City, Maryland, provided the backdrop for a car that Wagner drives rather than hides away as a trailer queen.

BUILT FROM THE FRAME UP

Some of the first modifications you notice are the wheels. To say the rear wheels are deep is an understatement. You could lay a dollar bill flat on the fifteen inches of lip. A small toddler could rest his bum in there. And a Coke bottle barely sticks out - Wagner demonstrated this convincingly. Having wheels this deep offers no tactical advantage, but it makes for one fantastic conversation piece.

The first thing Wagner did when the Stingray got home was remove the shell from the frame. He ordered a four-link rear frame, which he combined with a narrowed Dana 60 rear and coil-over suspension. Wagner added new brakes, brake lines, a front suspension, and new fuel lines before a 16-gallon gas tank was added. He then purchased a roll-bar kit from S&W; Race Cars that would be welded to the frame.

Wagner mounted the frame to a jig and cut the rear frame section out. The new rear was fabricated from frame rails, tubing, and crossmembers sent by S&W.; He cut the generic pieces to the proper length and size. With the new frame constructed, the entire thing was sandblasted and painted gloss black.

To create a true Pro Street Vette, fiberglass wheel tubs were built to accommodate the setup. With the frame in place and holding steady, the body was reunited with the frame and the floor was cut out to make room for the oversized Mickey Thompson rear rubber.

Wagner sent the car to Sutton's Corvettes in Chestertown, Maryland, to have the remainder of the old paint stripped. He ordered a new front clip and rear quarter panels and smoothed out the kinks and weld spots on the body.

Like his grandfather and father before him, Wagner's brother Carl was no stranger to high-performance vehicles. While the car was being prepped and molded, a 1970 LS6 454 big-block was being put together piece by piece by Carl, who built the motor and did the electrical wiring. Meanwhile, a new driveshaft was on route from Salisbury, Maryland, and a Turbo 350 transmission was making its way down from Philadelphia.

In three months' time, the Vette was recovered from Sutton's. The body was once again separated from the frame and the engine and transmission were bolted into place. After the mounts were set, body and frame were reunited a second time, and this Stingray - which a few years earlier had been a lost cause - was gradually taking hold of its destiny.



A polished 1970 LS6 454 big-block anchors the show-ready engine bay, backed by custom wiring and a three-inch exhaust.

THE TRICKS ARE IN THE DETAILS

Wagner made it a point to have all the mechanical and body work completed prior to any of the unique design work he would add. While the headlights and hood seem innocent enough, Wagner wanted a few tricks rarely seen on such vehicles. He added a circuit-breaker box accessible through the driver's-side wheel well, congregating the car's internal fuses in one place.

The hood is activated remotely through the console or a key fob and lifted by electric actuators, so no one ever has to press a grimy fingerprint to the paint. The headlights look like stock components, but come with a catch. "They are actually in two pieces and made of fiberglass," said Wagner. "The top half of the door is mounted stationary while the bottom section drops down when the headlights are turned on. Each hand-built bucket holds two rectangular headlights."

The engine bay is a dynamic part of the showmanship Wagner adores. It begs for attention as much as the paint job with its polished finish. The firewall is crafted from stainless steel, while the master cylinder has been relocated under the dash and mounted with custom brackets. Even the inner fenders have been louvered to help built-up heat escape.

Other features include a three-inch exhaust system that runs the length of the Vette and meets Sanderson block-hugger headers through enlarged tail-pan openings. How is that for clearing your throat?

While the interior looks like it's built to spend its time on temperature-controlled arena floors where the only thing bouncing off the paint are camera flashes, Wagner assures it is perfectly functional. The racing seats, dash, and gauge cluster were all completely custom accessorized. The six-point roll bar was upholstered in leather and painted to match the exterior.

The headliner was shaped to follow the contours of the dash pads, and the unique console was formed from metal and upholstered with the same materials used on the 1997 Corvette sport seats inside. "Finding a radio that I liked to fit the dash was next to impossible. My brother had the idea of making the top of the dash flat, which would allow room for the radio to mount horizontally. Doing that made room for the power-window and hood switches below the heat and A/C knobs," said Wagner.



The custom cabin combines 1997 Corvette sport seats, racing harnesses, a leather-wrapped roll bar and a one-off console.

TANGELO PEARL & TRIAL-AND-ERROR

Originally, Wagner had hoped to paint the car a dark metallic blue, but when his friend Alan Linton, who also helped on the car, pushed him toward a more unique color, House of Kolor Tangelo Pearl Orange was the result. Wagner's feelings were mixed. "I really wasn't sure if I liked it, but it was different," he said.

Before any color was finalized, the car was sent to Chris Layton at Chris's Restoration in Angola, Delaware, where the final body work was completed. The Stingray was returned to Wagner to finish the fiberglass work on the dash, frame the console, and make final wiring adjustments.

Then came the first street test. "No windows, no seats, no exhaust, just a ride," recalled Wagner. "We sat on milk crates." Sapp's Interior in Milford, Delaware, was the final destination for the interior work. Each Saturday morning, Wagner would pick up the Vette and spirit it back to his own garage, where he continued making adjustments and checking details such as bumper fit and grille placement.

Four years later, Wagner's Stingray had become what it is today. Although the sequence of steps tells you how he got there, the challenges were nothing to blink at. "Most of the challenges were created by trying to make the car different than the next Corvette coupe you see," said Wagner.

The headlight buckets, for example, were the result of plenty of trial and error. Without a template or aftermarket option, Wagner was heading into uncharted territory. The microswitches in the headlight doors had to be adjusted properly to open and close in the correct position. The hood hinges were one-off items, too, and the hood had to be replaced to satisfy the aesthetics of the Vette.

"The first hood we used on the car was a big-block hood with the scoop raised two inches to clear the air cleaner," said Wagner. "It just didn't fit the rest of the car. With everything that was done to the hood frame to make it work electrically, I had the outer skin replaced with a cowl-induction-style hood."

Parts were another problem. Interior door parts such as lock mechanisms and window regulators were difficult to locate. Wagner found what he needed at the Turkey Run in Daytona Beach, Florida, where a swap meet had just the right pieces to reanimate his non-working doors.

But it's the lights and the hood that invariably cause the biggest stir and require Wagner to field most of the questions from curious Vette admirers eager to get their hands on similar parts. When the question of origin comes up - as it always does - Wagner directs them to his brother Carl.



The front view reveals the Stingray's low, aggressive posture and Wagner's hand-built two-piece headlight treatment.

1966 STINGRAY SPEC OVERVIEW

PAINT	House of Kolor Tangelo Pearl
ENGINE	1970 LS6 454
INDUCTION	Edelbrock intake with 2x4 carburetors
EXHAUST	Sanderson block-hugger headers; full 3-inch Nitro-plated exhaust
DRIVELINE	Turbo 350 transmission; 3000-stall converter; Dana 60 rear with 3.55 posi-traction
WHEELS / TIRES	Budnik Four Thirty wheels; 18x8 front with Mickey Thompson SR radials; 20x15 rear with Mickey Thompson 18.29x20 SR radials
BRAKES	Aerospace four-wheel discs with slotted vented rotors
COMFORT	Vintage Air heat and A/C
DETAILS	Chrome by Advance Plating; Kenwood CD player



A street-driven build with show-car presence: Wagner's Stingray combines one-off fabrication, family craftsmanship and unmistakable color into a Corvette that attracts attention wherever it goes.

Feature text and specifications adapted from the supplied manuscript by Trey Palmisano.