



'It's Peter Max's Cars, Man!'

How one artist's big PR dream left 36 Corvettes in the dust in a Brooklyn basement. BY JOSH DEAN

THERE ARE 36 VINTAGE Corvettes in the garage below the former *Daily News* printing plant in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn. They're dusty, and secure behind a chain-link fence, as if being held as evidence: one Corvette for each year they were made, starting with a pearl-white '53 convertible and ending with a red 1989 model. Some of their windows are open. Some have flat tires. A lone white '61 rests outside the fence. On its back end, someone has scrawled NO ONE LOVES THESE VETTES! in the grime.

The plant is now a condo, and its residents are wondering why the cars are taking up their spaces. "It's a really beautiful collection," says Drew Hauser. "But it's hard to look at because of the general state of neglect." The only clue as to whose they are isn't even a Vette. It's a yellow VW Beetle adorned with pink clouds, blue stars, and multicolored UFOs—the hippie iconography of Peter Max, the mustachioed pop artist who's painted five presidents, had a one-man show at St. Petersburg's Hermitage, and sold thousands of posters and prints. All of which has made him whimsically rich.

And as he tells it in his studio near Lincoln Center, the Corvette story is a rich man's lark. "I'm not a car guy. I never drive," he says. Nonetheless, on an impulse, he and a friend went to the 1990 auto show and saw the collection there. He decided he'd love to paint them, "Yellow to red, or green to blue." That same friend woke him early the next morning to tell him that they'd been won in a VH1 contest by a Long Island carpenter named Dennis Amodeo. Max fell



How Max would paint one of the cars.

back asleep. "And I get the biggest PR dream I've ever had," he says. "Suddenly I see my Peter Max Corvettes coming out onto a football field with cheerleaders on top. There are 60,000 people cheering, screaming. A guy in front of me is screaming to the guy behind me—he's holding a frankfurter and mustard is dripping down his sleeve, I see this in my dream—he's screaming right at me, looking through me, 'It's Peter Max's cars, man!'"

Startled awake, Max picked up the phone, called Amodeo, and got him to come into the city with a lawyer. Max says he paid just under half a million dollars, "one third of what he asked for."

The plan was to do limited editions of the cars—but then "the dream wore off," and, well, "I've been so busy." He vows the project will still happen. The condo-board secretary, Michael Rogers, says that the original lessor of the garage was worried about lack of demand and so happily offered a large chunk to Max.

Don Sherman, an editor at *Automobile* magazine, who hasn't seen the cars, thinks that Max got himself a pretty good deal; Vettes before '68 are highly sought-after. (In fact, only 300 of the '53s were ever made.) "Just the ones from '53 to '68 are probably worth a million and a half," he says. And he dismisses the dust and scratches as "surface stuff, mostly irrelevant to a collector."

Told of Max's plan for them, though, he says, "From a car enthusiast's standpoint, they're worth more in their deteriorated condition than if they were painted by Peter Max."