

Love for cars translates in new enthusiast club

By
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MADISON — It's not hard for Tom Phillips to attract attention when he's out with his best girl.

And as long as people show a little respect and don't touch, he doesn't mind showing off her sleek, candy apple red-clad lines. He'll even give gawkers a peak of what's underneath — a 360-cubic-inch, 300-plus-horsepower engine.

Phillips' love, of course, is a mint-condition '76 Corvette.

His classic beauty will be just one of many vintage cars on display this evening from 6:30-8:30 p.m. at the Sonic Drive-in in Ridgeland.

The cruise-in showing is both a membership drive and meeting for Madison County's newly founded car enthusiasts' club, Mississippi Classic Cruisers.

Phillips and his beloved 'Vette are founding members.

He and his friends got the idea for a local car enthusiasts club at First Baptist Church of Madison's annual antique car show, which last year drew in more than 170 cars from the surrounding area.

"That got us thinking, there are a lot of cars in Madison County. I was amazed," Phillips said, estimating that between 400 and 500 classic cars are silting in local garages.

The four-wheeled treasures are vehicles "that guys like ourselves have kept, just waiting for an opportunity to get out and get to

had an opportunity to gather on a regular basis to, as Phillips puts it, "back into (their) favorite spot...meet (their) buddies and...lie about how fast (they) can go."

And driving any distance means increasing your chances to encounter one dread thing — rain.

"The bottom side of it needs to be as clean as the top side. So once you get it clean, you don't want to ride it in the rain anymore," Martin said of the bad-weather

them longer than I've had you'," Phillips said, adding his last sentence only slight above a whisper.

Though the cars might come first, they are not the only reason the three enthusiasts so highly anticipate tonight's drive-in. There is also the camaraderie.

"The average age is about 50. These guys aren't out there drinkin' or spinnin' their tires. It's all about fellowship," Phillips said.



Tom Phillips sits gingerly atop his beloved '76 Chevrolet Corv he has owned and kept in mint condition for 28 years. Phill will be just one of the many cars to be showcased at tonight's Ridge-land's Sonic from 6:30-8:30 p.m.

show it," he said.

"This baby boom generation is getting older now and a lot of them can afford these rides, so it seems to me there's a lot of interest in it," club member Mike Martin said.

"He's exactly right," Phillips agreed. "Back in the '60s, it was a race for horsepower:

the 454s, the 396s, the 4 horsepower race between manufacturers. Back then we afford those cars — we school or college — but m "em." Now...we can afford we always wanted as a kid. up to now, car lovers haven'

predicament that keeps most classics such as his jet-black '71 Chevrolet Chevelle Supersport 454 parked - safely high and dry - in the garage.

For club member John Slay, owner of a six small-block '76 Chevrolet Chevette with a 671 blower supercharger (think 800 horsepower), keeping one love in pristine condition might mean offending another.

"Mine stays in garage, and the wife's car stays outside. So they get special treatment sometimes," Slay said.

"All the time," Martin interjected, with a chuckle.

This kind of devotion can create a little jealousy with the significant other. Phillips attempts to compensate for this by putting things in perspective - at least in terms of a classic car fanatic. He has owned his '76 Corvette and his '63 Chevrolet Impala Sport Coup since he drove them brand new off of the lot.

"I've had those two cars longer than I've had my wife and kids, so whenever the subject comes up about making room for my wife's car or getting a new dining room table, I go, 'No, we're not selling the cars. I've had

"You meet the nicest people in this hobby, obsession or whatever you want to call it, depending on how far you want to take it," Slay agreed.

Those traveling to Tupelo for the Blue Suede Cruise or to the coast for Cruise on the Coast will, apparently, meet a large number of those "nicest people."

According to Slay, more than 100,000 people gawked at more than 6,000 cars during last year's week-long Cruise on the Coast.

Martin and Phillips are hoping to schedule a similar, multi-day event on a smaller scale for Madison as early as October. Tonight, though, it's just time for hamburgers and shakes, The Beach Boys and The Byrds, and love affairs with the curves, colors, power and grace of their classic cruisers.

Mississippi Classic Cruisers doesn't have any stringent guidelines for membership in the club or participation in the cruise-in. It is an open car club for all years, makes and models for cars and trucks, domestic and foreign.

Call Phillips at 853-8077 for more information.