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Powerful engine revs will go quiet as electric cars hit roads: 'I'm gonna miss the sound'

Show caption

In a decade or so, the vroom and roar of a gasoline engine will be replaced by the silence of an EV. Here's why sound matters to enthusiasts.

Jamie L. LaReau Detroit Free Press

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A red Corvette with a license plate reading "Suprtoy" sits amid exotic European sports cars, handmade hot rods, a 1934 Ford owned by a retired Ford car designer and even one of the first 1968 Ford Broncos — green with cream-colored seats.

It's early on a recent Saturday morning and a small parking lot next to Pasteiner's Auto Zone Hobbies shop on Woodward Avenue near 14 Mile Road in Birmingham has transformed into a makeshift auto show.

The crowd is as eclectic as the cars. There are collectors, classic car designers and, on occasion, even big name auto executives such as Ford Motor Co. CEO Jim Farley and General Motors President Mark Reuss showing up, said Steve Pasteiner, the owner.

This group of about 100 are united in a passion for gasoline-powered automobiles. Sure, the world is shifting to electric vehicles in the future, heck even Reuss' and Farley's companies are both making big pushes for all-electric futures, but this group hangs on to little bangs of combustion that combine to create a roar like no other.

"There's a distinct sound of a six-cylinder flat engine in a Porsche versus a V8 versus a turbo-charged four-cylinder," said Frank Conner, president of the Western Michigan Region Porsche Club of America, which has 693 members. "Everybody loves to hear their car start up and hear that sound."

Steve Pasteiner, left, and his son Steve Pasteiner look over and talk about the "Silver Bullet" that was parked in front of Pasteiner's Auto Zone Hobbies in Birmingham on Saturday, July 30, 2022, during their weekly summer muscle car get-together. This 1967 Plymouth Belvedere GTX was referred to as the "King of Woodward Avenue" when it drove up and down the avenue in the late 1960s and early 1970s.
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But there's no denying that the enthusiasts' passion for powerful exhaust tones will be relegated to the past at some point. The replacement will be virtual silence, punctuated with the occasional cacophony of artificial pedestrian warning noises emulating from EVs. It's an inevitable — and for many, bittersweet — subtext that lingers on these folks' minds.

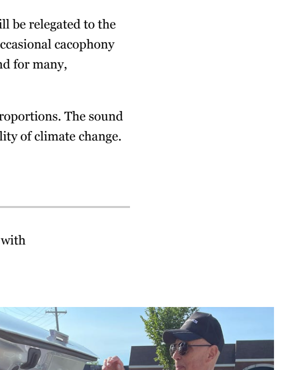
"With the classic cars there's a romantic beauty about them with the sound and proportions. The sound augments the image," Pasteiner said. "But it's a changing world. You have the reality of climate change. So to be speeding with a clear conscious, you want to have an electric car."

A famous cold start

The cars and this crowd stir something in drivers passing by them on a Saturday, with engines often revving loud enough to drown out conversation.

But no one seems to mind. In fact, the best compliment you could bestow on a car owner standing near their pride and joy is to make a request: Start it up.

"It's not going to have cold start because it's still warm from the drive down here," said Alex Ortner, of his 2011 SLS AMG sports car built for Mercedes-Benz, with a 6.2-liter engine that makes 563 horsepower. "AMGs are famous for having a good sound — a very deep, muscle-car kind of sound, which is not usual for European cars. I love it. The sound is important."



Alex Ortner, of Keego Harbor, with his 2011 SLS AMG sports car built for Mercedes-Benz. It has a 6.2-liter engine that makes 563 horsepower and is known for the sound its engine produces.
JAMIE L. LAREAU/DETROIT FREE PRESS

Ortner, who drove from Keego Harbor to Birmingham to show off the AMG he paid $125,000 for on eBay a few years ago, opens the gullwing doors and climbs inside as he explains that AMG engineers developed "cold start" to make the engine a little louder and the revolutions per minute jump up a little higher, "so it's a more aggressive start when the engine's cold."

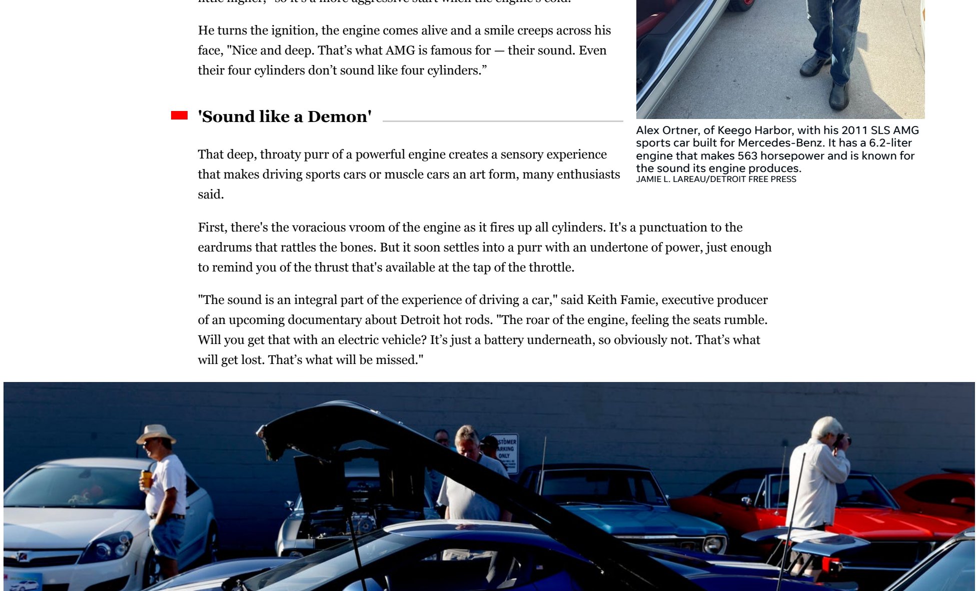
He turns the ignition, the engine comes alive and a smile creeps across his face, "Nice and deep. That's what AMG is famous for — their sound. Even their four cylinders don't sound like four cylinders."

'Sound like a Demon'

That deep, throaty purr of a powerful engine creates a sensory experience that makes driving sports cars or muscle cars an art form, many enthusiasts said.

First, there's the voracious vroom of the engine as it fires up all cylinders. It's a punctuation to the eardrums that rattles the bones. But it soon settles into a purr with an undertone of power, just enough to remind you of the thrust that's available at the tap of the throttle.

"The sound is an integral part of the experience of driving a car," said Keith Famie, executive producer of an upcoming documentary about Detroit hot rods. "The roar of the engine, feeling the seats rumble. Will you get that with an electric vehicle? It's just a battery underneath, so obviously not. That's what will get lost. That's what will be missed."



A Chevy Nova parked next to a Ford GT shown off during a weekly summer muscle car get-together at Pasteiner's Auto Zone Hobbies in Birmingham on Saturday, July 30, 2022
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But most car enthusiasts know EVs will deliver the speed with instant and high torque. Also, as a society, our environment will benefit from EVs, they admit.

"But will we always in our heart reminisce nostalgically about the days gone by and the roaring GTOs and the Silver Bullets and the Corvettes racing up and down Woodward?" Famie said. "For sure."

Famie made his way through the crowd outside of Pasteiner's on Saturday with his film crew documenting the scene for "Detroit: The City of Hot Rods and Muscle Cars." The two-hour film will premiere at the Henry Ford museum in June next year.

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"An important part of the film is nostalgic. Looking back at hot rods, muscle cars, designs and what made them famous and what made Woodward famous," Famie told the Free Press. "But what happens now in the next generation? Where's the sound of the car going to go and how is that going to affect the electric world."

Famie shared a transcript of Detroit-native comedian Tim Allen's musings in the film on Allen's Tesla Model 3 compared with his hot rod cars such as a Dodge Demon.

"The sad, tragic thing is that now they're making sound boxes for the Tesla," Allen said. "So you can make it sound like whatever you want. You plug a USB drive in. It's tragic that I'm actually gonna buy one because it's got a woofer in it and you can make it sound like a Demon."

But even the piped-in fake sound won't replicate the rumble of the seat and vibration of the steering wheel when an internal combustion is roaring, Allen said.

"I get into my Demon after the Tesla and I realized why I love that car," Allen said. "I'm hearing it, feeling it, it's combustion. It's a mechanical thing."

Name that exhaust tone

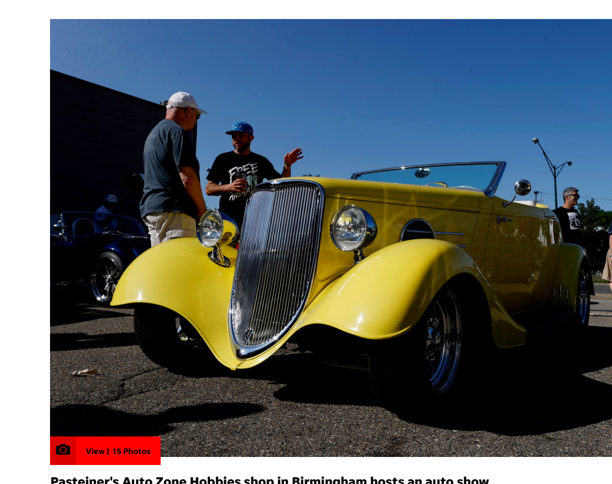
Ford engineers understand it. They created various engine sound elements for the Mustang Mach-E electric SUV. The "unbridled" mode, for example, is an "exhilarating drive experience that pays homage to the legacy of Mustang sound," Ford noted.

More: To vroom or not to vroom? Automakers craft new sounds for electric performance vehicles

There is a history behind the sound of cars and the correlation to speed.

The early auto innovators got press for their cars by racing them. The early cars did not have an exhaust system and so they were sometimes deafeningly loud, said Jonathan Klinger, vice president of Car Culture at Hagerty, a Traverse City-based automotive media and specialty insurance company.

"So, over time, there was this idea that powerful cars also sounded really cool," Klinger said.



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Pasteiner's Auto Zone Hobbies shop in Birmingham hosts an auto show

A small parking lot next to Pasteiner's Auto Zone Hobbies shop on Woodward Avenue in Birmingham is transformed into a makeshift auto show.

To modify an engine to make a car faster for racing, one of the first things a person does is eliminate the exhaust system to allow more air to the engine, Klinger said. This means no muffler because it could rob performance. The result has been a loud engine, which people correlate to power and speed.

"EVs are as powerful or more powerful than their internal combustion counterparts," Klinger said. "You get that sensation of speed, but you don't have that sound."

Klinger said there are some serious enthusiasts who like to guess what car it is by the sound.

"We've done fun quizzes over the years to name a certain V8 we record," Klinger said. "The Subaru WRX, it has a very distinctive sound. I can identify a Subaru WRX exhaust coming long before I see it. It is a different and unique sound."

When it comes to auto racing, the loud noise is part of the fan experience. Klinger said the Formula E cars, which are all-electric, are still impressive because of their performance and speed. They're not completely silent, they emit a high-pitched whistling sound.

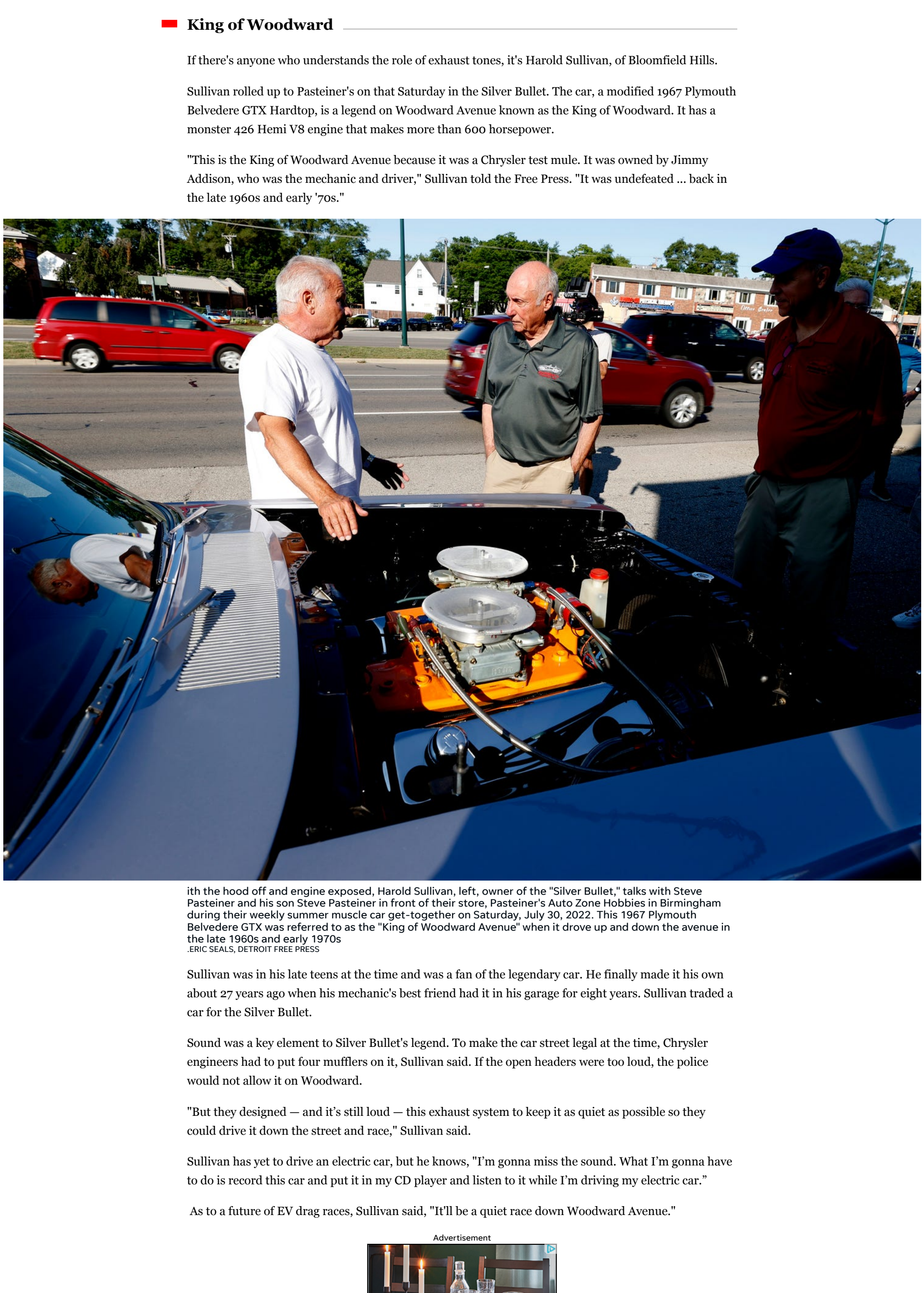
Still, argues Famie: "There's something about our human psyche, especially Detroiters, whether you're a car aficionado or not, you hear that rumbling of a car go by, you turn your head and something gets your blood going. There's something about sound and cars that drive our emotion. It almost always leads back to nostalgic good feelings of younger days."

King of Woodward

If there's anyone who understands the role of exhaust tones, it's Harold Sullivan, of Bloomfield Hills.

Sullivan rolled up to Pasteiner's on that Saturday in the Silver Bullet. The car, a modified 1967 Plymouth Belvedere GTX Hardtop, is a legend on Woodward Avenue known as the King of Woodward. It has a monster 426 Hemi V8 engine that makes more than 600 horsepower.

"This is the King of Woodward Avenue because it was a Chrysler test mule. It was owned by Jimmy Addison, who was the mechanic and driver," Sullivan told the Free Press. "It was undefeated ... back in the late 1960s and early '70s."



ith the hood off and engine exposed, Harold Sullivan, left, owner of the "Silver Bullet," talks with Steve Pasteiner and his son Steve Pasteiner in front of their store, Pasteiner's Auto Zone Hobbies in Birmingham during their weekly summer muscle car get-together on Saturday, July 30, 2022. This 1967 Plymouth Belvedere GTX was referred to as the "King of Woodward Avenue" when it drove up and down the avenue in the late 1960s and early 1970s
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Sullivan was in his late teens at the time and was a fan of the legendary car. He finally made it his own about 27 years ago when his mechanic's best friend had it in his garage for eight years. Sullivan traded a car for the Silver Bullet.

Sound was a key element to Silver Bullet's legend. To make the car street legal at the time, Chrysler engineers had to put four mufflers on it, Sullivan said. If the open headers were too loud, the police would not allow it on Woodward.

"But they designed — and it's still loud — this exhaust system to keep it as quiet as possible so they could drive it down the street and race," Sullivan said.

Sullivan has yet to drive an electric car, but he knows, "I'm gonna miss the sound. What I'm gonna have to do is record this car and put it in my CD player and listen to it while I'm driving my electric car."

As to a future of EV drag races, Sullivan said, "It'll be a quiet race down Woodward Avenue."

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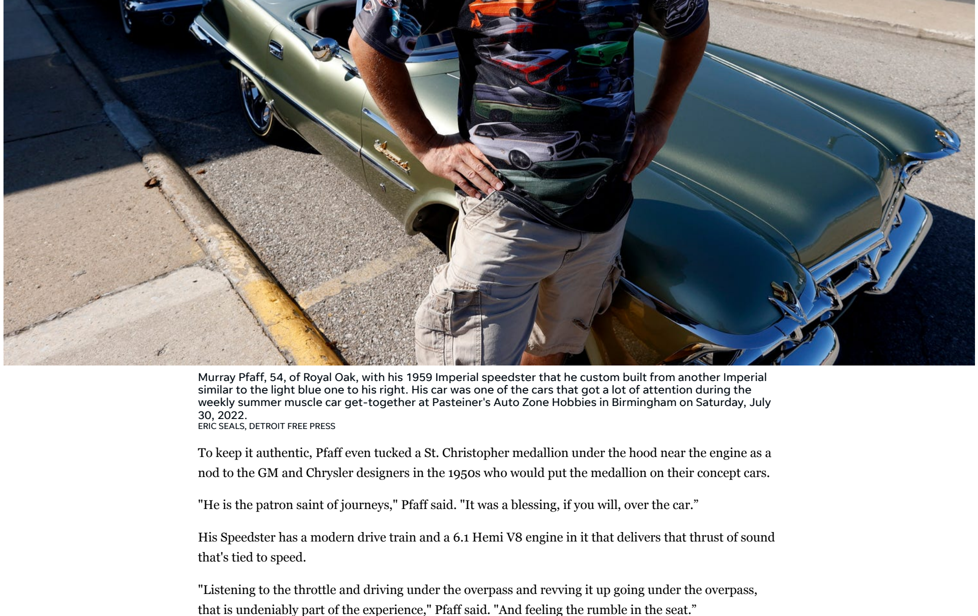
Can't deny the butt dyno

Murray Pfaff is more open to the future of EVs even as he stands next to his one-of-a-kind internal combustion Imperial Speedster in Evolution Green, a custom color he designed.

The two-seat Speedster never existed. Pfaff made it by cutting apart a 1959 Imperial four-door sedan. Pfaff, who owns Pfaff Designs, designs classic cars for a living.

"In the 1950s, Chrysler built all kinds of incredible concept cars. They never produced a two-seat sports car like the Corvette or a Thunderbird until the Dodge Viper came along," Pfaff said. "So this is my 'what if' in 1959, Imperial or Chrysler, had built a competitor to the '59 Corvette or the Thunderbird?"



Murray Pfaff, 54, of Royal Oak, with his 1959 Imperial speedster that he custom built from another Imperial similar to the light blue one to his right. His car was one of the cars that got a lot of attention during the weekly summer muscle car get-together at Pasteiner's Auto Zone Hobbies in Birmingham on Saturday, July 30, 2022.
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To keep it authentic, Pfaff even tucked a St. Christopher medallion under the hood near the engine as a nod to the GM and Chrysler designers in the 1950s who would put the medallion on their concept cars.

"He is the patron saint of journeys," Pfaff said. "It was a blessing, if you will, over the car."

His Speedster has a modern drive train and a 6.1 Hemi V8 engine in it that delivers that thrust of sound that's tied to speed.

"Listening to the throttle and driving under the overpass and revving it up going under the overpass, that is undeniably part of the experience," Pfaff said. "And feeling the rumble in the seat."

But Pfaff is eager to do his first EV build. He even bought his first EV enthusiast magazine on Saturday.

"While you don't have that full body, all the senses, even the smell of the exhaust and gas, which in some cases is all right, and you're lacking the audio feedback ... you can't deny the butt-dyno of an EV," Pfaff said. "The feeling of being pushed back in your seat."

Dyno is slang for dynamometer, which is a device that measures force, torque or power. For those who don't own their own dyno, that inertia that pushes you back in your seat — called butt dyno — is the alternative, Pfaff said.

"When I go for a ride in my neighbor's Rivian pickup truck, he can do 0 to 60 in under four seconds in off-road tires," Pfaff said. "You can't deny what's happening there. He tells you to put your head against the head restraint because if you don't, it's going to snap violently into the head rest because there's that much power."

Separating out the enthusiast

The Ferrari Club of America's Michigan Chapter has about 150 members who like to rev the engines in synchronicity at events, said Jim Pawlak, president of the Michigan Chapter.

"It literally vibrates through your body and it connects you more to the vehicle and makes you feel like you're more in charge," Pawlak said.

Pawlak owns a 2012 California Ferrari in Rosso Corsa red. He bought his first Ferrari, a 1995 model 348, in 2007. It was a gated-shifter with no power steering and a manual roof. But it made 310 horsepower and was, "loud as loud could be. I loved it."

Pawlak has driven a Tesla and he said it was fun to drive.

"But I am not driving a Tesla for the same reasons I drive a sports car," Pawlak said. "A Tesla is missing all the familiar cues that go with a performance automobile, such as the sound, the engines and the rev of the engine as you shift through the gears."

And perhaps therein lies the delineation between the enthusiasts and others. It's the reason Famie is doing the film: To preserve the nostalgia of revving racers for future generations.

For Alex Ortner and his AMG's cold start, it is the reason he doesn't sweat it when it comes to EVs and their sound of silence.

"I think you're separating out the car enthusiast, which is probably about 5% of the population," Ortner said. "Most people don't care. They don't even know what their car sounds like."

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