

Ghia 450/SS - Summary

The Ghia 450/SS was derived from a prototype Ghia 230 S originally designed by Sergio Sartorelli of Carrozzeria Ghia in 1962. The sister company of Carrozzeria Ghia, Officine Stampaggi Industriali (OSI), was at the time producing the Ghia-designed Fiat 2300 S under contract from Fiat Corporation. While Ghia did the “coach-built” and prototype automobiles, OSI was a traditional assembly-line manufacturer, producing cars, like the Fiat 2300 S, by the thousands.

A major client of Carrozzeria Ghia was Chrysler Corporation. A 25-year relationship had existed between Ghia’s president, Luis “Gigi” Segre, and Virgil Exner of Chrysler, who had teamed-up to produce the Chrysler Turbine car, the Chrysler Crown Imperial Limousine, the Dual-Ghia, the Ghia L 6.4, and numerous concept cars.

The 230 S Coupe was first introduced by Ghia as a potential higher-end replacement of the Fiat 2300 S, at the Turin Automobile Show in October 1963. The year 1963 had been a very tough one for Ghia. Sergio Sartorelli had left Ghia early in 1963 while the first Ghia 230 S prototype was being built, and no head of design had been appointed as a replacement. The owner and General Manager of Ghia, Luis Segre, had died within weeks after Sartorelli’s resignation, leaving Ghia without a president or head of design. Carrozzeria Ghia had been sold to Ramfis Trujillo, a wealthy car aficionado who took no interest in running the company. Also early in 1963, Virgil Exner had been “retired” by Chrysler Corporation, thus ending the U.S. link of the Ghia/Chrysler partnership.

Sartorelli was hired back by Ghia, but now as a consultant, immediately after Segre died, primarily to complete the 230

Sprototype. Ghia hired a new president, Gino Rovere to replace Segre, and assigned the general management duties to Giacomo Gaspardo-Moro, who had been the top assistant to Segre. Gaspardo-Moro completed and brought the first 230 S to the Turin show. It was widely acclaimed for its beauty.

In early 1964, the new president of Ghia, Gino Rovere, died, being replaced by yet another new president, Giacomo Bianco. Gaspardo-Moro carried on, and an enhanced version of the 230 S Coupe was shown again in Turin in October 1964, once again to much acclaim. It appeared on the cover of Road & Track in March of 1965. In the accompanying article, R&T stated that Ghia was looking for a manufacturing partner to provide engines and drivetrains and was negotiating with four major manufacturers. It stated that the 230 S had a huge engine compartment and could easily accept a big American V-8 engine.

Burt Sugarman, an entrepreneur, successful drag and stock car racer, and automobile enthusiast in Beverly Hills, flew to Turin to order a car in May of 1965, and met with Gaspardo-Moro. He found a "Spyder" version of the 230 S being produced by Ghia for the 1965 Turin show, but that Ghia had not yet found a manufacturing partner to provide the engine and drivetrain. Fiat had decided not to put the 230S into production. If no new manufacturing partner could be found, they would show the car in Turin with the same Fiat 2300 cc engine (tweaked by Abarth) that they had used in previous years.

Sugarman called his good friend John DeLorean who was at the time the General Manager of the Pontiac Division of General Motors, inquiring as to Pontiac's interest in providing engines and drivetrains. DeLorean said that GM did not have an interest in dealing with an overseas design/production

company and already produced a performance sports car, the Corvette. DeLorean suggested that Burt call their mutual friend, Bob Anderson, general manager of Plymouth. He believed that Anderson would probably have an interest, as Chrysler Corporation did not have a sports car to compete with Corvette, and he knew that Chrysler had a long history of working with Ghia.

Sugarman met with DeLorean and Anderson in Detroit, and in subsequent meetings convinced Bob Anderson to provide Barracuda engines and drivetrains for the new Ghia Spyder. The car would be coach-built in Turin, have a production of less than 200 cars, and sell in the U.S. at a target retail price of \$8,000. That was substantially more than a Corvette (=/- \$4,500), but well below the price of competing exotic Italian coach-built cars (+/- \$12,000).

The Ghia would offer the amenities of high-end American cars, including a powerful V-8, air-conditioning and power brakes and steering. It would have a removable hard top as an option. Due to the approximate 4500 cc displacement of the Barracuda engine, the car would be known as the 450. All Chrysler Corporation components in the car would carry a full Chrysler Corporation warranty, and the cars could be serviced at any Chrysler Corporation dealership...a huge advantage over Italian coach-built competitors. The concept was simple: the rarity and beauty of an Italian coach-built car combined with the horsepower and amenities of an American luxury car, serviceable almost anywhere and carrying the prestige of Ghia and Chrysler brands.

As no previous history of the 450/SS has been written, and thus little has been known about the car, rarely has anyone asked, "WHY would Anderson have agreed to provide engines

and drivetrains for a very limited production import?" There were numerous Italian coachbuilders purchasing crated American V-8's for installation in their limited-production automobiles, but none were produced with the full assistance of a major American automaker. This has led many to conclude that the 450 was a production prototype for a possible Plymouth competitor to the Chevrolet Corvette, a "Corvette killer".

Sugarman has said that he believes that Anderson's interest was purely to draw customers into his showrooms and to enhance the image of his new Barracuda "Formula S" components, all of which would be incorporated into the new 450/SS. He has stated that Bob Anderson never mentioned a "Corvette Killer" to him.

Others believe that Chrysler Corporation had long been seeking to design and produce a competitor for the Corvette, and had shown "concept cars" (designed by Exner and produced by Ghia) as early as 1960. The 450/SS represented an opportunity to introduce, at very low risk or cost, a production prototype for a "Corvette Killer". Should the 450/SS prove successful, the design could be produced in far greater numbers, manufactured on assembly lines at either OSI or a U.S. assembly plant. The price of a production version could easily have been brought down to Corvette territory of about \$4,500, and Plymouth was developing a line of powerful V-8's that could compete with, or beat, the Corvette. Their "Hemi" had been used by Richard Petty in the previous year to win his first Daytona 500. (And it was Richard Petty who drove the first 450 in racetrack trials to achieve a speed of 123 mph in a first prototype.) Plymouth was in the horsepower race with GM and in the ensuing years, their small and big

block V-8's developed an enduring reputation for brute-force horsepower. All they needed was a sports car.

There is a powerful argument to be made that the Ghia 450/SS was a production prototype for a Plymouth sports/muscle car. When the 450 was produced at Ghia it incorporated as many Plymouth and Chrysler parts as could be utilized, from engine and drivetrain, to transmission shifter, exhaust system, gauges, door handles, vent windows, gas tank, and even the filler cap. There is no plausible explanation for WHY Plymouth would provide such a wide array of parts, other than to determine that "off the shelf" components could be applied to an ultimate production version.

While there were other Italian coach-built automobiles utilizing American V-8 engines (Intermeccanica, Iso Grifo, etc.), none, other than Ghia, was developing an automobile with the full support, engineering assistance, and cooperation of a major U.S. automaker that intended to assist in marketing these cars in their showrooms, and in providing a warranty on all mechanical components.

Strength is added to the "Corvette killer" argument based on the fact that Chrysler Corporation had dispatched engineer-par-excellence Paul Farago to Turin to assist in the integration of Barracuda "S" parts into the new 450. Farago spoke Italian and English fluently, and had worked with Ghia in producing the Chrysler Turbine car, an automobile produced in Turin and then shipped to the U.S. for installation of the engine and drive train. It was Farago who brought a 1965 Barracuda to Turin, disassembled it, and then assisted in the integration of as many Chrysler Corporation parts as possible into the new 450.

The premise employed in moving forward with the new 450 had been based on the representation that the Ghia prototype Spyder could easily accommodate a V-8 engine and Barracuda drivetrain, but as the specifications for Barracuda components were scrutinized it was discovered that the Chrysler components didn't quite fit. The 450 would have to be lengthened by four inches and widened by one inch. Farago and Gaspardo-Moro also determined that the "bird cage" design of Gilberto Colombo that had been employed in the earlier 230 S prototypes could not be employed in the new longer, wider, heavier car. They created a unique tubular "ladder frame" on to which the Barracuda components could be secured, and to on which the body could be welded, making the car semi-monocoque in construction...a hand-made "unibody" similar to the process used in manufacturing by Chrysler Corporation.

Unable to complete the longer, wider 450 in time for introduction at the Turin show in October, 1965, the original 230 S Spyder prototype, fitted with a Fiat engine, was introduced in Turin, badged and promoted as the new Ghia 450/SS. It received widespread publicity in Europe and the U.S. In October 1965 Ghia hired Giorgetto Giugiaro as head of design and he made several modifications to the design of the car including a revised front and tail fascia, and helped to create the first "real" 450 prototype.

In March of 1966 the "real" V-8 powered Spyder was introduced at the Geneva show as a "Chrysler 450". In subsequent months, the car was re-identified as the Ghia 450/SS, powered by a Chrysler V-8. The name "Plymouth" was never used by Ghia in describing or marketing the 450/SS.

The first Ghia 450/SS was introduced to the American press in July 1966, (and the first prototype was sold by Sugarman in

Beverly Hills the same month), and appeared on the cover of "Sports Car Graphic" in October 1966.

The coach-built 450/SS was made by hand, with each body part being produced individually, numbered for that specific car, fitted to wooden "bucks", and then welded together by experts and then welded to the ladder-frame. The process was time-consuming and expensive. By the time that production of the coach-built cars had begun (probably in late summer 1966) the target U.S. retail price of the car had grown to \$13,200, equal in cost to a Cadillac Eldorado convertible, a Corvette, and an MG, combined. It is believed that production capacity was approximately 4 cars per month.

The new Ghia 450/SS was sold in Europe by designated dealers in each country, while Sugarman's Ghia of America had import rights to all of North America. He sold cars at his dealership (Beverly Hills Ghia), and arranged for the sale of the 450/SS by a number of dealers in California and Reno and Las Vegas, including Chrysler Corporation and Chevrolet dealerships.

It had undoubtedly been discovered by Plymouth by early 1966, (and perhaps much earlier by Paul Farago) that the 450/SS engine compartment could not accommodate a "big block" V-8. Corvette had utilized "small block" 327 ci engines through 1964. But Corvette changed the game in 1965 when it had introduced its 396 ci, 425 hp big block, followed quickly by their now-legendary 427 ci, 435 hp engine. While Plymouth had engines to match or even beat the Corvette, the Ghia 450/SS was not the platform that could accommodate them, and may have been the "nail in the coffin" of the Ghia 450/SS as a "Corvette Killer" production prototype.

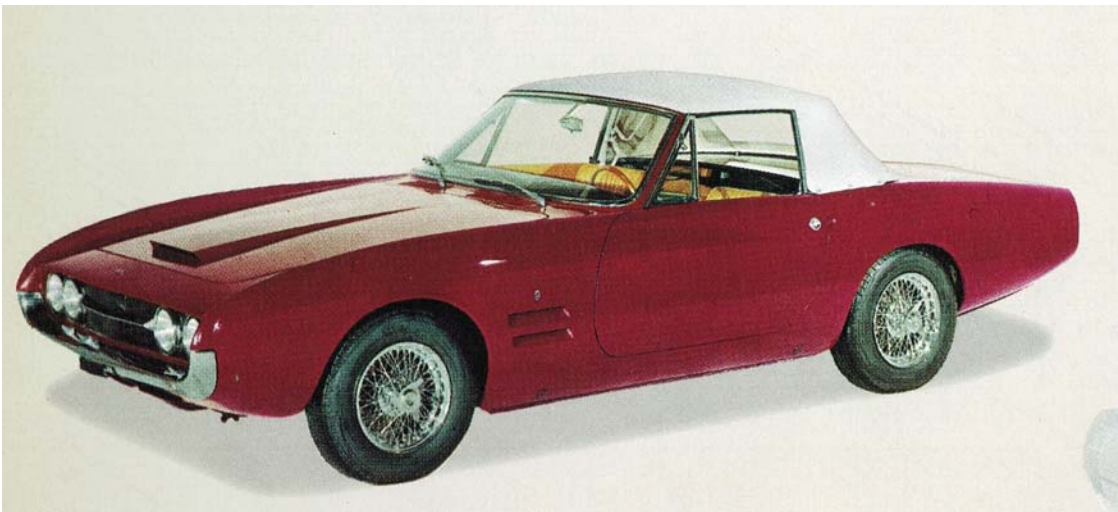
Production of the 450/SS proceeded slowly creating long waits for would-be buyers. In May of 1967 Ramfis Trujillo sold Ghia to Rowan Industries and Alejandro de Tomaso. Rowan wanted to build electric cars and even a golf cart, and De Tomaso, (who had already contracted with Ghia to produce his "Vallelunga"), wanted to build cars of his own design. He also worked to improve his burgeoning relationship with Ford Motors. Chrysler Corporation was not a "fit". Resources were diverted to other areas, and disagreements between De Tomaso and Gaspardo-Moro resulted in Gaspardo-Moro's resignation soon after De Tomaso took over as the new "hands on" president. Thus was lost the last "champion" of the 450/SS, and the last linkage between Ghia and Chrysler Corporation.

The production of the 450/SS was eventually terminated some time in mid-to-late 1967. An estimated 57 cars had been built, of which 37 are believed to remain. Chrysler never again partnered with Ghia, and Ghia never again produced an automobile under its own name. DeTomaso and Rowan sold the Ghia brand to Ford, and Ghia ceased to exist as an entity.

The 450/SS was the last car ever badged as a Ghia and its demise marked the end of Plymouth's only foray into "Corvette Killer" territory.



1966 Corvette:
Wheelbase 98"; Length 175"; Width 70"; Height 50"; Weight 3,250 lbs



1966 Ghia 450/SS:
Wheelbase 98"; Length 178"; Width 69"; Height 50"; Weight 3,130 lbs