

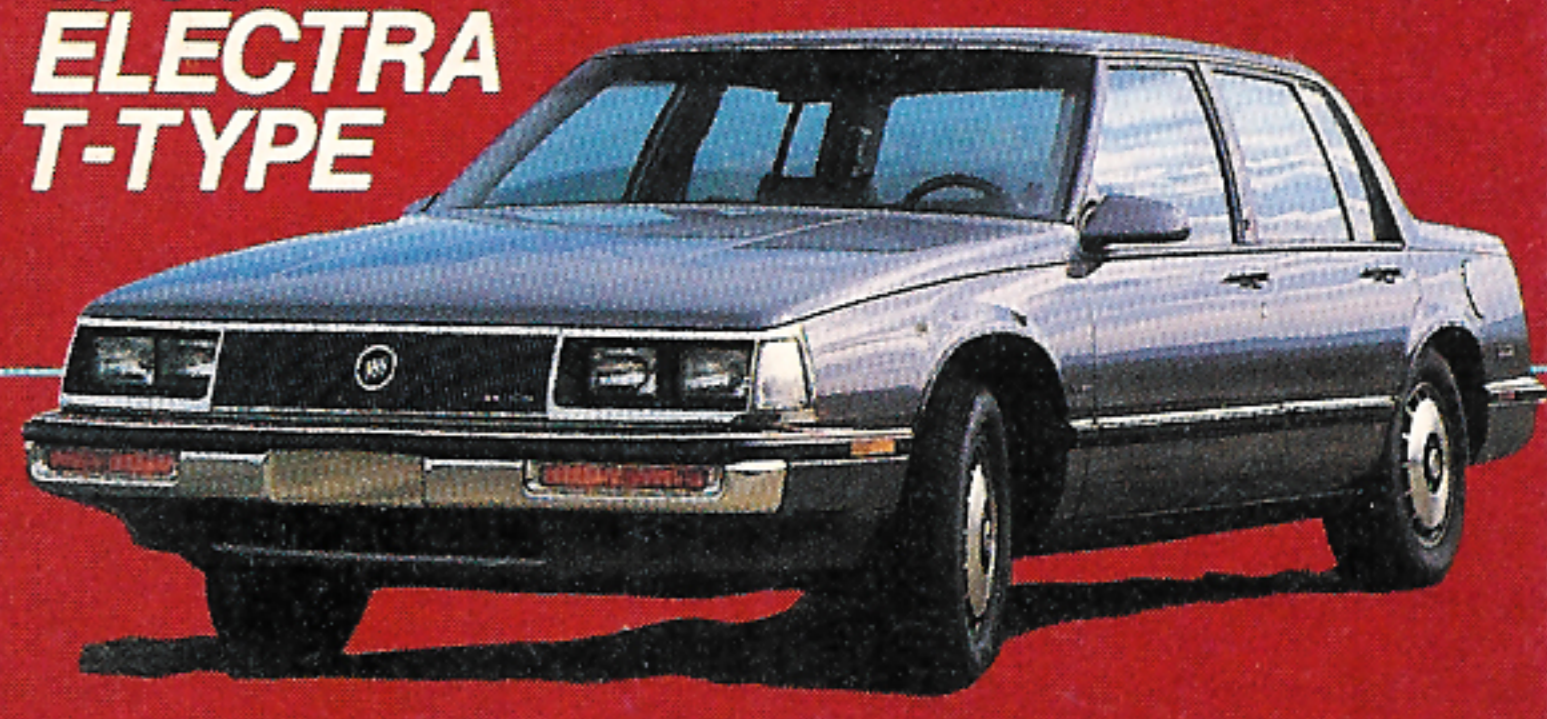
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# 300ZX CONVERTIBLE

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TOYOTA vs. VOYAGER vs. VANAGON**  
**ONE ON ONE:  
COLT TURBO vs. GTI; STE vs. CHEVY ES**

# Nissan 300ZX-R

*MT* and Richard Straman team up  
to give the Z the kindest cut of all

**T**he new Nissan 300ZX has turned out to be something of a source of controversy around these offices. While we're pretty much of one mind regarding the merits of the lusty new 3.0-liter V-6, the roomy cockpit, and the long list of standard equipment goodies, response to the new Z-car's styling has hardly been uniformly enthusiastic. And when the conversation turns to the all-new same-as-before chassis, things can get downright hostile. Actually, the chassis and attendant rancor figure as part of a bigger debate: Is this, or isn't this, a genuine Sports/GT car? Which is like trying to decide, once and for all, if the Venus de Milo is really beautiful: The answer is, "Certainly, if it just wasn't for that little problem with the arms."

Well, if they'd just listened to reason, and accepted the true identity of this car (supplied by us), we probably all could

by Jim Hall

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICH COX  
AND PAUL MARTINEZ

have saved ourselves a lot of trouble. But then you wouldn't have had a chance to see this open air Z-car, would you? Come to think of it, neither would we. So it seems like it was worth all the debate after all.

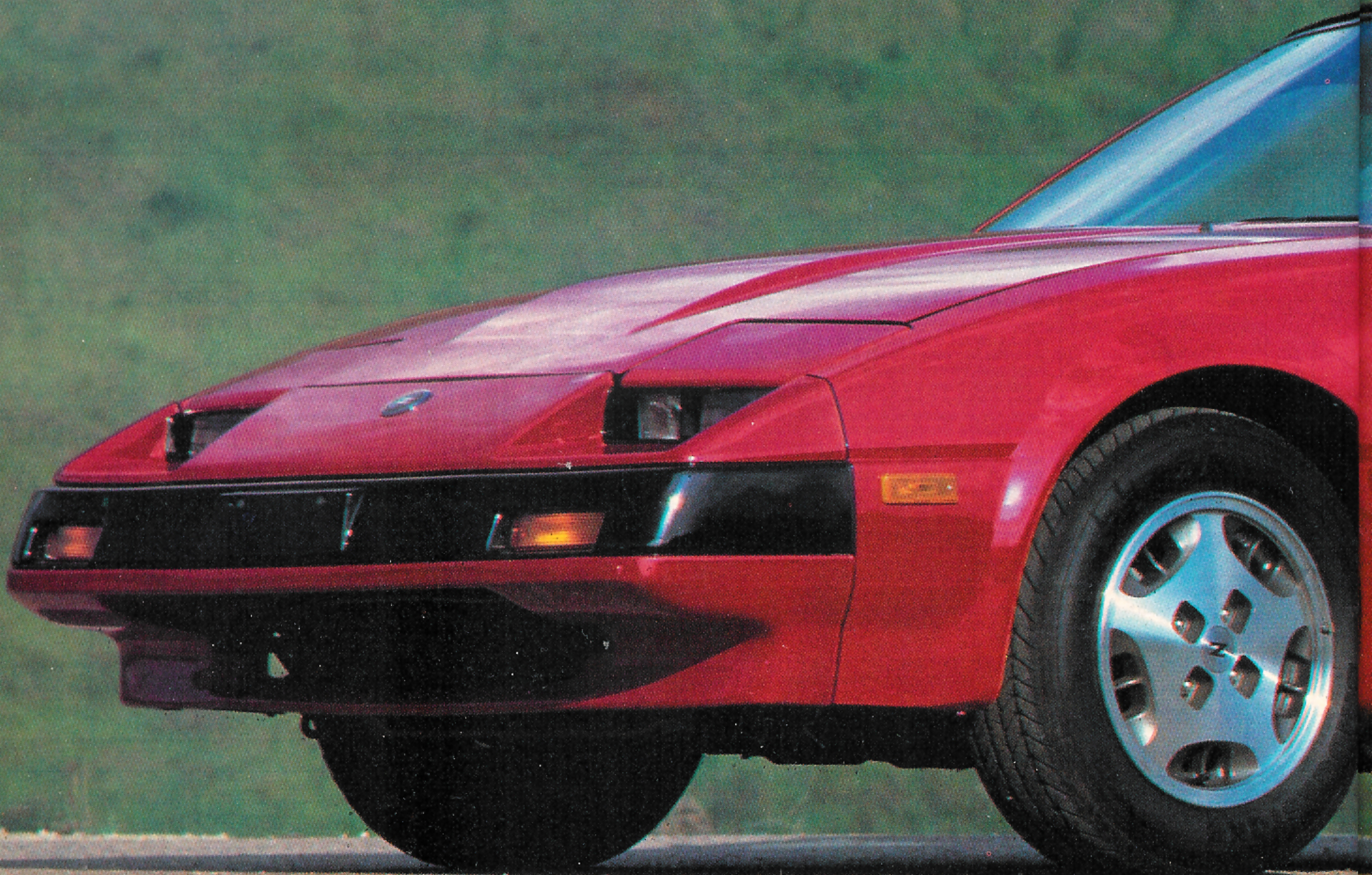
Anyway, what nobody seemed willing to accept, initially, is that the new Z-car is really nothing more than an Austin Healey with a top and a couple decades worth of electronic development. That's right; an Austin Healey, the 3000 to be exact.

Consider: Both cars are powered by torquey 3.0-liter engines (you'll forgive the difference in configuration between Vee and inline, we hope). Both cars feature adrenalin-generating power-to-weight ratios. Both sit atop suspension pieces adapt-

ed from proprietary sedan hardware, the Healey borrowing from the portly Austin Princess, the 300ZX dipping into the Cedric/Gloria parts bin. (For those of you unfamiliar with these sedans, which are not sold here, just think of them as Japanese Oldsmobile Ninety-Eights.) And finally, both Z and Healey are much better open-road tourers than back-road bandits.

In most respects, of course, the newer Nissan is the superior performer. After all, 17 years have elapsed since Sir Donald Healey's namesake passed into history. But the older car still holds two trump cards over the ZX: it's a drophead (Brit for convertible), and it has plenty of personality. The Z-car, on the other hand, for all its high-tech flash and eye-widening engine performance, seems to be pretty much just another luxoid JT (Japanese Tourer).

The Z-car/Healey parallel didn't exactly



capture everyone's imagination in one blinding flash, provoking plenty of conversation hereabouts, but it did provide the discussion that led directly to this project. It happened this way: Someone said, "Well, if the Z's not a real GT or a full-blooded sports car, lopping the top off won't hurt it any, and then it'll be as much of a sports car as the 3000 MK III." Or words to that effect. And after a prolonged period of squinting at appropriately re-touched Z-car pictures, to get some reading on what the result might look like, we decided to go ahead and produce the *MT 300ZX-R* (for Roadster; you were probably thinking Ragtop, right? Sorry).

The immediate problem was finding a car to dismember. When we started this program, the new ZX had just gone on sale, so finding an owner willing to let us perform surgery on his or her personal transport was, without putting too fine a point on it, impractical. So we talked to Nissan, where the idea produced a surprisingly high level of enthusiasm. Not enough enthusiasm for the company to give us a market-ready car that could actually be sold for real money, though. So we finally hit on the idea of using one of many prototype "sample" cars imported by Nissan for various marketing and engineering studies. These cars can't be sold in the U.S. for legal reasons and are either shipped back to Japan or scrapped. This struck all con-



## Hey, it looks like a Ferrari Daytona Spider! Coincidence?

cerned as the perfect solution, since it was always possible that our final chop would yield the world's first three-piece 300ZX.

Once we'd lined up a car, we had to find somebody willing to do the slicing and dicing. Naturally, Richard Straman's name came up immediately. Straman, a Chicagoan who has immigrated to Costa Mesa, California, originally came out to Orange County to restore vintage cars, and to this day, that seems to be his first love. But the restoration business also got Richard into the convertible business, when he was asked if it would be feasible to take a Ferrari 365 GTB4 Daytona coupe and make it a spider. It was, and Straman has produced about 25 topless Daytonas to date. When we approached Richard he had just finished (a) building a GLC cabriolet for Mazda to display at the Tokyo Motor Show and (b) winning first in his class at the '83 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance with a splendid 1953 Delahaye 235. While other fainthearts here and there may have had some reservations about the ZX project, Straman was certifiably enthusiastic. With Straman's Camaro/Firebird convertible-conversion sales leveling off after nearly 400 built, the possibility of selling a few

replica ZX convertibles looked pretty appealing. And after a few sketches, Richard was convinced this could be his best conversion yet.

We gave Richard our 300ZX and left him alone.

While the ZX was receiving Straman's surgical attention, we contacted National Performance Centers in Santa Monica, California, to get a pair of Recaro seats for the ZX roadster. NPC recommended Recaro's new KRX model for the Nissan. The KRX is one of Keiper Recaro's new low-cost (we're talking relatively here) seats, retailing for only \$485 per side. We had the seats upholstered in a combination of Connolly leather and knit cloth. Other than having the seats and door panels refinished to match the Recaros, the interior of the convertible is unchanged, resplendent in its original beet-red plastic.

As Straman was working on the ZX, he realized the open car would bear more than a passing resemblance to that original roadster he'd produced—the Ferrari Daytona. To help emphasize this visual similarity, Straman pulled the black side molding off the ZX (hooray!) and made sure the top would have the same long-sloping rear

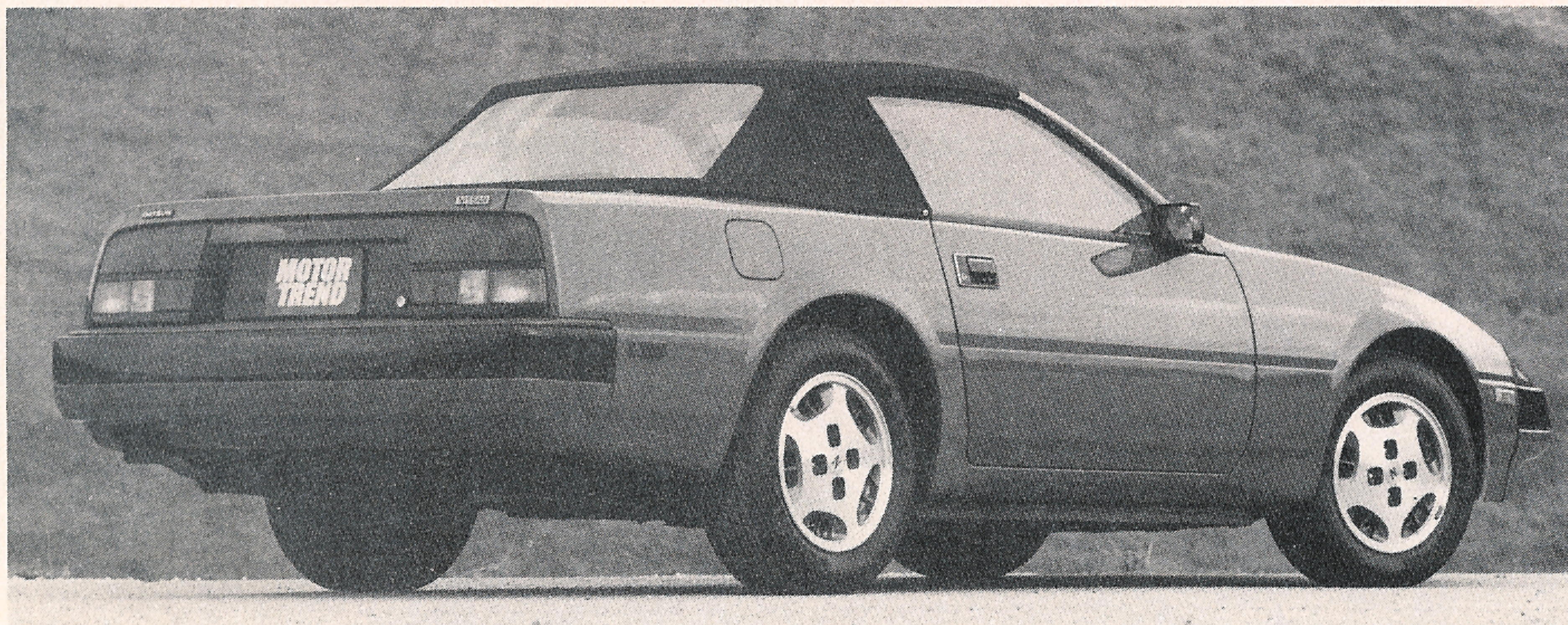
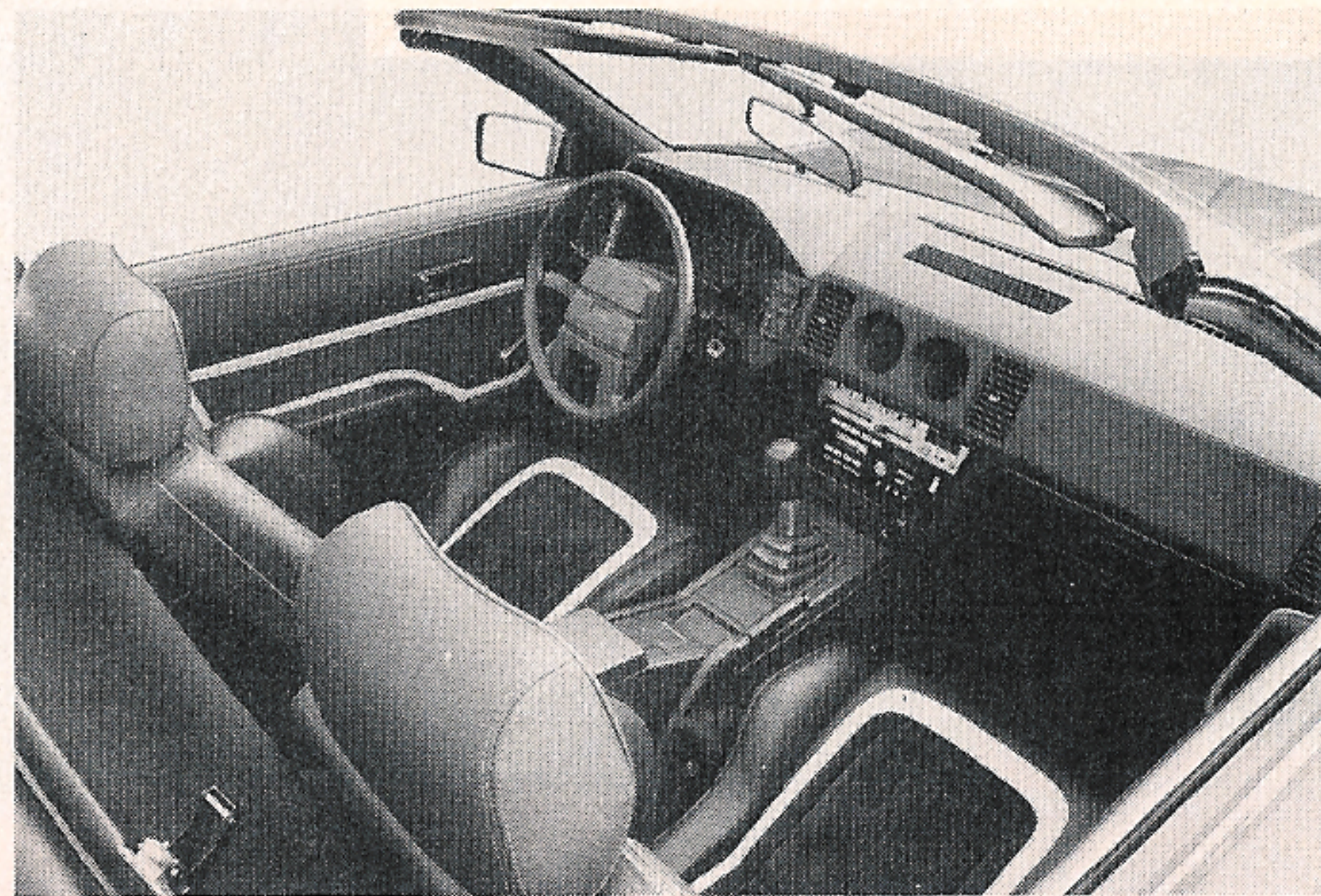
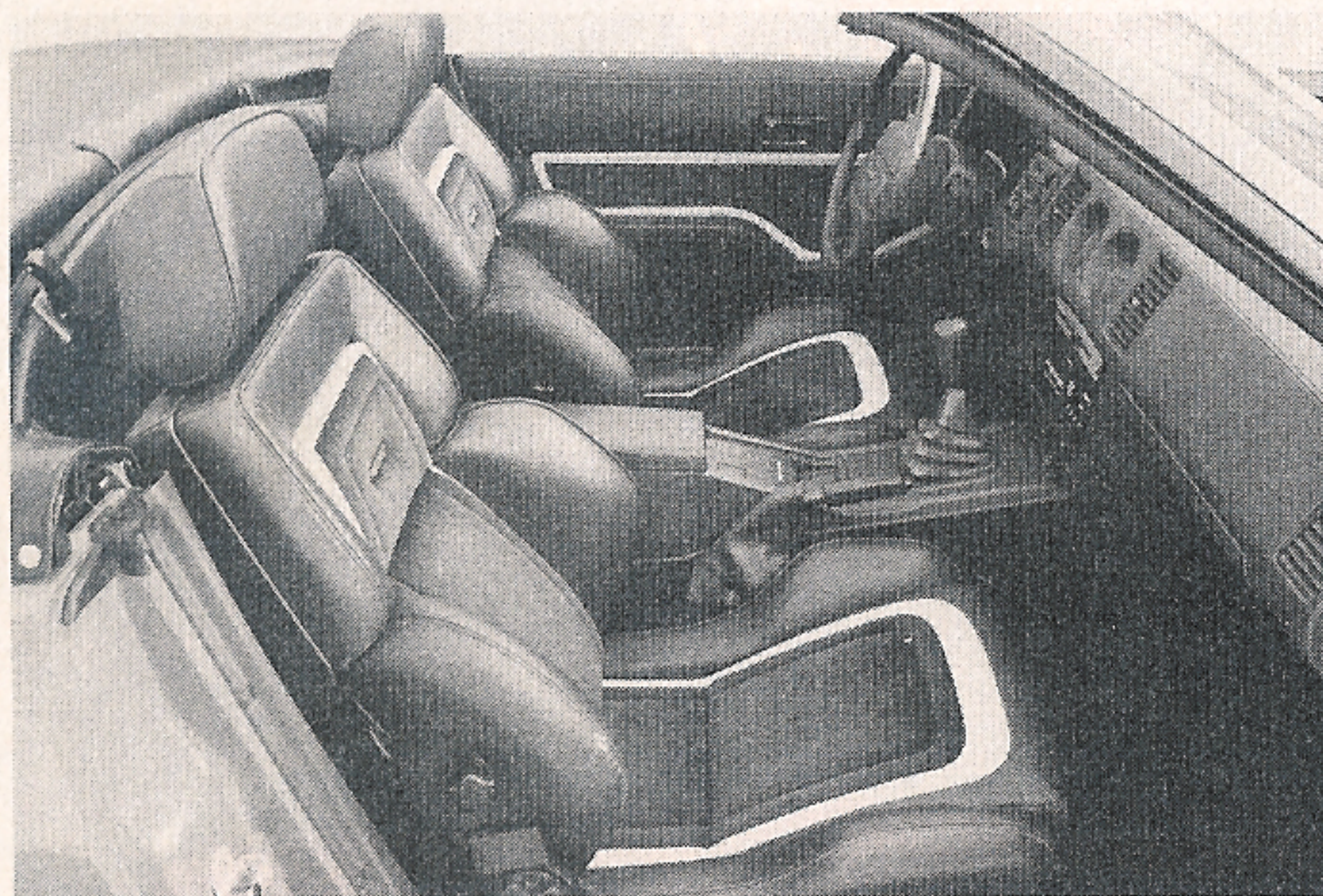
window as the Ferrari.

In order to maintain the roadworthiness of the coupe, Straman had to beef-up the rocker panels on the ZX. The reinforcements tie into the front and rear subframes, with a collapsible structure at each end. Additional bracing was required at the rear to maintain cowl-flex rates and characteristics similar to those of the coupe with a T-bar roof (Straman's target). On our project ZX, Straman used steel for all body panels, including the trunk.

"In retrospect, I don't think I'll build any more with the metal decklid," he says. "It's just too labor intensive, with a lot of pounding and hand forming."

It's heavy, too, requiring two gas struts to hold the trunklid open for loading. The trunk itself is very well finished, using many of the original Z-car trim components. The spare tire is still readily accessible under the decklid and the regular tire can be put in the load area so long as the tire is deflated (which is the main reason you put a road wheel in the trunk).

The German canvas-covered top folds easily with no snapping or zipping required. A partition between the trunk and rear-load space behind the seats has been



## Not on your life

added for both security and structural reinforcement. With the top up, the padded and carpeted load area can carry medium-sized parcels or as many as four grocery bags. A restraint bar keeps the bags in place during braking. With the top down, the area is filled with the fabric roof. A rigid aluminum boot, handsomely covered with padded vinyl (again à la Daytona), is hinged in the middle so it can be stored in the trunk.

In typical Straman fashion the quality of both workmanship and materials is first rate. Little details, indicative of the thoroughness that separates Straman's conversions from other hack convertibles, are everywhere. Example: the areas beneath the main top hinges are dished, sporting drains fitted with one-way valves to eliminate build-up of water inside. Example: the top can be lowered or raised by the driver or passenger—while seated. Example: the shelf behind the seats and the inside of the solid-top boot have been both padded and lined to prevent damage to the folded top.

On the road, the ZX roadster is virtually identical to a T-topped Z-car. The loss of a roof is not readily noticeable unless one is doing some very hard charging over irregular surfaces. Come to think of it, not unlike a 3000 Healey. The limits are higher, but the throaty engine and wind in your hair is just like the Austin. And yes, the conversion to convertible effects yet another big change in the ZX; it adds a definite personality to the car. A good deal of this comes from the rather drastic change from hatchback-fastback to notchback-roadster. Top up, the 300ZX convertible is as close to a Ferrari Daytona Spider as you can get for this much less than \$50K. The car looks great, roof raised or lowered, and there are few ragtops you can say that about. Either way, the roadster looks several thousand times better than the original coupe. Suddenly the 300ZX looks the way it's supposed to.

"So, okay, *how* much is this much under \$50K?" you ask. At the time of this writing, Straman hasn't priced out a final production version, but says the price of conversion won't be more than \$6000 to \$6500 maximum. That means a normally aspirated 300ZX soft top would have a base sticker of around \$22,000 and a ZX Turbo *plein air* would carry a \$25,000 entry fee. Either way, the ZX roadster is a sight more reasonable than a Daytona Spider—and bags more fun than any convertible in its price class. Of course, if the Healey was still around, it might be a different story.

For information concerning the 300ZX roadster conversion, write to John Schirmer at:

**R. Straman Co.**  
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