KEEPING YOUR CAR ALIVE

Peter Bohr

Pay less for good stereo

By Peter Bohr
Contributing Editor, *Road & Track*

There must be some perverse rule in life that says things always have to get more complicated than they already are.

Back in the halcyon 1960s, we were all perfectly content with a simple radio in our cars — two big knobs, a dial, one speaker and, if it was a fancy model, push buttons to select the station.

But now even a tape player isn't enough. No siree. Car-stereo manufacturers expect us to put more audio components in our cars than in our living rooms, and to have more power in the stereo system than the engine.

Recently, Road & Track's editors asked an audio expert to assemble a first-class stereo system for one of our test cars. The poor car returned loaded to the roof with components. Its trunk was half-filled with megawatt amplifiers. There were woofers and tweeters everywhere — behind and under the seats, in the door panels and under the dash. And the radio — excuse me, the "tuner and tape deck" — was a maze of teeny-weeny buttons and digital readouts. And the price tag? An astounding $6,000.

Well, the system did sound spectacular — for about two days. First the automatic signal-seeking tuner gave up. Then an amplifier went. Then hisses and pops. We were also worried about parking the car on the street for fear some thug would smash the windows and swipe the equipment. It got to the point where staff members would have gladly swapped our state-of-the-art sound system for a push-button radio out of a '65 Buick.

With that experience in mind (and the fact that I had about 98 percent less money to spend than Road & Track), I recently bought a basic $29.95 AM/FM cassette for my own car. And it sounds terrific.

Here are a few tricks for making an inexpensive radio/cassette unit sound like a much pricier one:

• Understand that there are inexpensive units, and then there are cheap (in all senses of the word) units. Buy a low-priced model, but one with a reputable brand name.

• Even a $500 unit will sound lousy with the wrong speakers. Although you'll find a bewildering variety of speakers on the market, just remember that bigger is better. The big ones are often more efficient and provide deeper bass notes. Expect to pay at least $35 for a decent pair of speakers.

• Good bass response also depends on where you mount the speakers. As a speaker operates, sound comes from the front and back. If there's an enclosed area of sufficient space behind the speaker, the back wave can rebound and reinforce the sound coming from the front, creating excellent bass.

In most sedans, the ideal mounting position is in the shelf behind the rear seat; the back wave then has plenty of room in the car's trunk to rebound.

So-called "surface-mount" speakers come with their own enclosure and don't require you to cut any holes in the car's interior. But there's also little room for the back wave to do its stuff, and bass response is usually poor.

• With only a pair of speakers in the rear, all the sound comes from behind your head. To fill out the sound, mount a second pair either in the front doors or under the dash. It's OK to use smaller, surface-mount speakers here if you're getting good bass from the rear ones.

• If an AM/FM cassette unit's built-in amplifiers are underpowered, the sound will distort at higher volumes. But for about $35, you can buy a separate amplifier/equalizer that will boost power — and sound quality — considerably.

So for a total investment of less than $150 (four speakers, an amplifier/equalizer and the radio/cassette unit), I have a relatively simple system that sounds darn near as good as that $6,000 one.

Maybe even better, 'cause it works.

Olympic vehicle surplus

AUTO FACTS

(NC)—When General Motors of Canada was asked what they would do with the 1,000 plus vehicles they had loaned to OCO 88 when the 1988 Winter Olympics are over the answer was simple.

Let the volunteers and full-time employees have first crack at buying them.

"It seemed like the best idea of all," said Blair Upton, project manager, Calgary '88 Olympics, for General Motors of Canada.

"We have had terrific positive response from the 9500 volunteers and full-time Winter Games personnel who have been driving vehicles and we felt that, as a gesture of thanks to them, we could offer them an attractive purchase deal on those Chevrolet, Pontiac and GMC vehicles," he said.

The vehicles will have seen duty in a wide variety of roles by the time the Winter Games conclude, including providing transportation to and from the Olympic venues for athletes and officials and carrying members of the International Olympic Committee, the various National Olympic Committees, the Canadian Olympic Association and government representatives at every level.

Some of them have also been on the road as support vehicles for the cross-Canada Olympic Torch Relay, but regardless of their function they are still regarded as being prized souvenirs of these XVth Winter Olympic Games — the first ever held in Canada.

As official supplier of transportation products to the Calgary Winter Games, General Motors of Canada introduced a specific Olympic Vehicle lineup of Chevrolet Celebrity Eurosport Coupes and Sedans, Pontiac 6000 LE Sedans and Station Wagons and GMC S-Blazer/Jimmy Trucks. All are available to purchase as new vehicles through the GM dealer network across Canada.

AUTO FACTS

Electric vans being tested

(NC)—Two General Motors Griffon electronic vans are undergoing a one-year field test by Hydro-Quebec. Along with seven electric utilities in the U.S. which are testing a total of 31 GM Griffons in their service fleets, the purpose of the program is to promote electric vehicles as a reliable alternative to traditional internal combustion engines. The Van Demonstration Program started in 1985 by the Electric Vehicle Association of Canada in conjunction with General Motors.

The first objective of the association is the introduction next year of cost-competitive electric vans designed for North American commercial fleets. Its second objective is progress toward the development of advanced-technology electric cars by the early 1990s.

The electric-powered Griffon runs by a propulsion battery comprising 36 six-volt batteries housed in a slide-out tray beneath the cargo area. With fewer operating parts than conventional vehicles — it has no ignition system, clutch, transmission or distributor — the Griffon is easier and less expensive to maintain.

Designed for short-range city use, the Griffon vans have a maximum driving distance of about 100 kilometers. The battery has to be recharged overnight for about eight hours, although it will last for up to five years with repeated rechargings. Current technology is being applied to batteries that can provide for a longer driving distance.

Is your car singing the blues?

Your car can talk to you. Sometimes it even yells.

If your car starts "singing the blues," it could be a safety warning signal which, if neglected, could prove serious or even fatal.

Every "clunk," "wheeze" or "screech" sends a message.

"Ignoring your car's warning signals can be costly, or worse, a shortcut to an accident," advises the Dealers Safety and Mobility Council (DSMC) of the Highway Users Federation.

"Postponing auto maintenance is one way to live dangerously," says Marvin D. Hartwig, Council chairman and a new car dealer in Iowa City, Iowa. "In this age of self-service gas stations, vehicle maintenance too often is neglected by motorists."

Hartwig urges every driver to "listen" to his or her car.

To encourage better vehicle safety maintenance, more than 7,000 new car, truck, and tire dealer members of the Dealers Council loan to community groups free of charge a program entitled "Car Care for Safety."

The 13-minute audio-visual presentation explains in layman's terms how to spot trouble signs in your car, van or light truck.

It describes how a car's specific spunds, handling characteristics, and dashboard lights can be early warning systems for trouble ahead.

It teaches drivers how to describe problems accurately to mechanics, and stresses the need for regular maintenance by owners and professional technicians.