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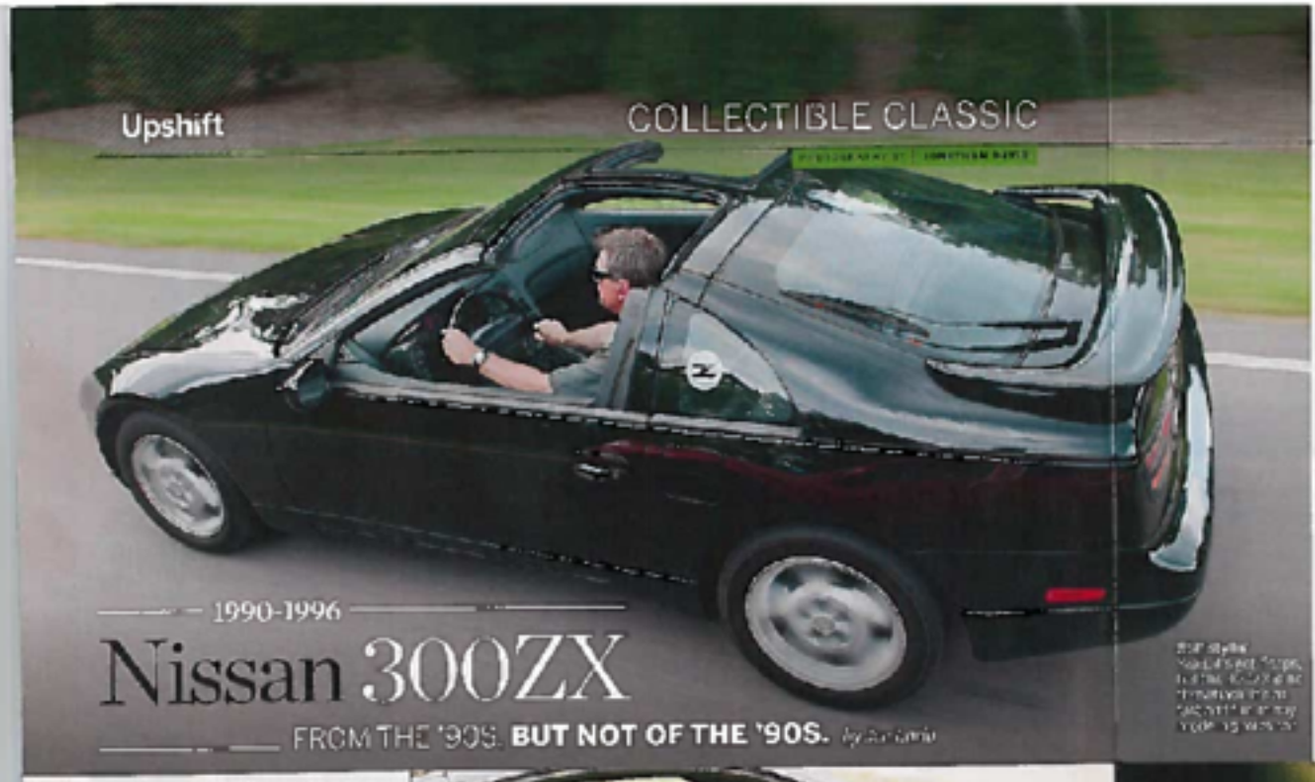

1990-1996

Nissan 300ZX

FROM THE '90S. BUT NOT OF THE '90S.

By Jim Gilmore

Despite the speed with which cultural trends come and go, it's probably too soon for 1990s nostalgia. That's OK, because we don't appreciate the 1990-96 Nissan 300ZX as a period piece; it is instead a timeless sports car, which is what you get when you go all out to create a world beater. "As soon as the 300ZX was unveiled at the 1989 Chicago auto show, we knew it would reinvent the image of cars from Japan," remembers one West Coast editor Michael Jordan. "Just as the 240Z had in 1969."

Indeed, the 300ZX traces its lineage directly to the original 240Z, which was the brainchild of then Datsun USA president Yutaka Katayama, the legendary "Mister K." Through successive iterations, however, the Z-car had lost its focus and became a kind of personal luxury car. The fourth-generation Z was both a course correction and a quantum leap forward.

The new 300ZX's DOHC 24-valve, 3.0-liter V-6 used the stout cast-iron block from the previous Z-car's SOHC V-6 but was otherwise a fresh, high-tech design. It incorporated variable intake valve timing to boost low-end torque, then crested to its power peak at 6400 rpm. The normally aspirated version put out 222 hp; the Turbo developed 300 hp thanks to a pair of small turbochargers (one for each cylinder bank). At the time, the Corvette's OHV V-8 made 245 hp, while the Toyota Supra's turbocharged inline-six developed 232 hp. Both versions of the 300ZX were equipped with a viscous limited-slip differential to help put the power down.

Meanwhile, the suspension featured dual-mode dampers to deliver crisp handling without a punishing ride. In addition, the Turbo came with Super HICAS four-wheel steering, which quickened steering response and improved cornering stability. (Four-wheel steering became fashionable in Japanese cars during the 1990s, but only the Nissan system seemed more than just a gimmick.)

The high-tech character of the 300ZX reflected an internal directive at Nissan known as "901," which sought to make the company No. 1 in innovative technology by 1990. The Nissan 300ZX was a product of an ascendant Japanese auto industry, one that was boldly moving beyond the economy sector. Nissan in particular was riding high, as a new focus on driving dynamics gave spirit to the company's cars, while Katayama's presence in marketing efforts gave the company a sense of heritage.

Upon the new Z's arrival, this magazine pitted a 300ZX Turbo against a Porsche 944 Turbo (which was half-again more expensive) and found the Nissan to be a match for the Porsche on the track while being much more livable on the street. It was named an Automobile Magazine All-Star that first year, and we marveled at the 300ZX's ability "to deliver knockout performance without the compromises." We added: The 300ZX "generates its speed and cornering in a friendly, low-effort fashion."

To drive this Z-car today, as we recently did with a '96 300ZX Turbo, is to be every bit as impressed as we were back then. Although the car premiered 25 years ago, it's stunning how contemporary it feels from behind the wheel. The 3.0-liter twin-turbo V-6 starts instantly and pulls strongly all the way to the 7000-rpm redline. The 300ZX Turbo was fast then (0-60 in 5.5 seconds; a top speed of 165 mph), and it's fast now. There's an unmistakable shove in the back when the twin small turbos quickly spool up, yet this six is torquey enough that throttle response is progressive and predictable from low speed. The shift lever for the five-speed manual is mounted high on the center console, and it moves beautifully from gear to gear—Nissan used double-cone synchros to smooth shift action. The steering provides a nice read on what the front tires are doing, making it easy to get comfortable with this car.

It's certainly easy to get comfortable in the Nissan 300ZX's interior. The flowing center console and door armrests create a wraparound theme, yet the low cowl keeps things from getting claustrophobic. The high-back bucket seats are power adjustable, and the neat little pods protruding from the dashboard put switches within fingertip reach. The cassette player is a throwback (got that mix tape?), as are T-tops, and the glass panels overhead do crank the cabin, but the A/C is able to keep up.

T-tops were standard when the fourth-generation Z-car debuted in 1989 as a '90 model. Initially, it came in three forms: normally aspirated two-seater, normally aspirated long-wheelbase 2+2, and Turbo two-seater. An entry-level hardtop coupe arrived in 1991 and a convertible followed for 1995, although adapting the design to a roadster was clearly an afterthought.

That design draw from Nissan's highly regarded mid-engine MID4 concept, and thus the 300ZX doesn't have the extreme, cab-rearward proportions of many front-engine, rear-wheel-drive sports cars. Instead, its arc-shaped greenhouse sits closer to the middle of the car, as a strong architectural element. Design editor Robert Cumberford called the Nissan 300ZX "the most balanced and admirable Japanese design achievement in years." No wonder the car still looks good today, its clean surface treatment contrasting sharply with the textured sheetmetal that is all the rage now. While we can't call its styling contemporary, we would assert that it will prove timeless, much like the 1990-1996 Nissan 300ZX itself.

The Specs

ENGINE
3.0L DOHC DOHC V-6, 300 hp, 283 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION
5-speed manual
DRIVE
Rear-wheel
FRONT SUSPENSION
Control arms, coil springs
REAR SUSPENSION
Control arms, coil springs
BRAKES F/R
Vented discs
WEIGHT
3474 lb

A fast ride
The Turbo stood at the top of the heap, with a minimum speed of 165 mph.
But the 300ZX was also sold as a normally aspirated two-seater, a 2+2, and a convertible.

The Info

YEARS PRODUCED
1990-96
NUMBER SOLD
65,000 (US)
ORIGINAL PRICE
$43,999 (300ZX Turbo, 1996)
VALUE TODAY
$9000-$15,000
WHY BUY?
The 1990-96 300ZX represents a high-water mark for performance from a golden age of Japanese cars. Even more so, it's as easy to own for 'nineties sports car, one whose depreciation years are behind it. Prices are low, yet not likely to get lower.