

VOULEZ-VÙ?

After 40 years languishing in a Californian back yard, this Zagato-bodied Fiat 8V – which competed twice in the Mille Miglia – is now enjoying a second European career

Words: Richard Heseltine Photography: Mark Dixon



The sun is dilute and fails to heat the air, the surrounding vista being two parts '60s sci-fi movie set, one part bombsite. Gravel crunches under foot, as does assorted debris, the super-groovy backdrop amplifying the sound of a strung-out V8 as it cannons sound out of its back pipes with strident urgency. What it lacks in size, it overcompensates for with commotion: a free-spinning shriek that's more outré than the guttural growl emitted by your average Detroit slugger. Sheathed in a Zagato wrapper, and enriched with a laudable motor sport pedigree, you would be hard pressed to recognise this car as a Fiat product.

But then that's the beauty of the sublime Otto Vù, the Turin giant's first – and to date only – bent eight-powered production





Right

When photographed by Siata and 8V expert Tony Adriaensens a few years ago in California, 000062 was very neglected but remarkably complete.

Below

Before and After photos show quality of restoration done in Italy and UK; well-respected, British-based Jim Stokes Workshops rebuilt engine and drivetrain.



'In the early '60s, Bob Turner stopped using the 8V and left it in his back yard'

car. And by Fiat standards, 'production' is a relative term as just 114 were made in a two-year run. Even then there followed endless variations and sub-species. In marque terms, the 8V was barely a blip on the radar. It's not as if it ever made much of an impression on business plans or spreadsheets; it sure as hell never returned a profit.

Except that was never really the point. In modern parlance it was a 'halo product', the reflective glow from which radiated over lesser Fiats. This intriguing *gran turismo* was also a testbed, an exercise in allowing technicians a little playtime. Fiat had first proposed a V8 model in the late '40s, a flagship saloon – codenamed Tipo 106 – which made it as far as the prototyping stages. The test hacks failed to impress the suits and the project lost impetus. But what to do with the leftover engines? Simple: go racing.

Enter the Otto Vù. Unveiled at the 1952 Geneva Salon, this daring coupé married technical bravado with styling purity in one enticing package. Most new cars carry over at least some DNA from their predecessors, sports cars more often than not borrowing running gear from patrician saloons. Not so here, the 8V being largely new from end-to-end. Catching everyone off guard (there had been no press leaks or pre-launch

publicity), this was Fiat showing off. And how.

Conceived by design deity Dante Giacosa, the powerplant was particularly intriguing. An over-square, short-stroke engine with 70 degrees between banks, this all-alloy jewel featured pushrod valve gear and a pair of twin-choke Webers. Good for 105bhp at 5600rpm, and with a relatively modest 108lb ft of torque at 3600rpm, it sent drive to the rear wheels via a four-speed floor-shift with synchro on second, third and top. Of semi-unitary construction – separate steel chassis with tubular side-members, welded to the body – suspension aped the layout of the lowly Fiat 1100, with wishbones and coils at either end.

Clothing the whole ensemble was a graceful outline penned in-house by Fabio Lucio Rapi and honed in a wind tunnel. While the rear-three-quarter view aped the Cisitalia 202 Gran Sport, the frontal treatment was altogether fussier, although the horrid Art Deco grille inflicted on the show car thankfully didn't transfer to production.

And the plaudits rolled in. Testing a lightly tuned 8V destined for the Mille Miglia, Gordon Wilkins of *The Autocar* gushed: 'Handling and road behaviour leave an impression of a thoroughbred with stability, liveliness



'There's precious little styling tinsel – precious little of anything, since it doesn't even have a bootlid'



Below and right
8V competed in 1955 (below right) and 1956 (right and below) Mille Miglias; ACI sticker from 1957 has been faithfully retained on mirror.

Below
Centrally mounted fuel filler flap carries chromed 'I' for Italy; Fiat reputedly called its sports car '8V' because it believed Ford owned rights to term 'V8'.



'The 8V wasn't a motor racing colossus: it was a useful competition tool at national level'

and immense power. There is general light understeer. The steering is high geared, and the car goes into a four-wheel drift with all tyres squealing and the throttle wide open in a way which the expert driver will find greatly reassuring.'

Predictably the competition crowd flocked to the Ottu Vù, the ready availability of a powerful home-grown engine attracting several small-scale manufacturers, principal early adopter being Siata: the Turin minnow would use the V8 in its delicious 208S while also assisting Fiat in extracting more power from the three-bearing motor. In time, up to 127bhp was found by virtue of a warmed-up cam and a triple twin-choke carburettor set-up.

After the first 34 cars had been made, a restyle was initiated, most obvious divergence being an awkward-looking quad-headlight arrangement. Predictably, outside carrozzeria were also drawn to the Fiat, with Pinin Farina, Ghia and Vignale all bodying cars. Even Fiat made a special show car, a glassfibre-bodied coupé that aped the standard 'Rapi' outline.

Then there was Zagato's offering. The famed Milanese couturier crafted its first 8V outline in 1952. It followed through the following year with an open *barchetta* before putting its GT take into production (all things

being relative). Except that, this being Zagato, no two cars were ever truly alike. Front and hind treatments often differed, some cars bearing the trademark 'double-bubble' roofs. In 1955, the firm bought several leftover 8Vs from Fiat and carried on crafting

cars into the late '50s: leftover because the 8V had been quietly dropped from Fiat's line-up.

All of which is entirely understandable as it was crafted – by hand – in Fiat's 'skunkworks', the coachbuilt nature of even the regular catalogue model proving laborious and a distraction from the altogether more serious business of designing cars that actually made money. Similarly, the engine required specialist tooling and could never be mass-manufactured in anything approximate to volume. At least not economically. Add in a list price close to three million Lira, and it was in pretty elite company.

The 8V wasn't a motor racing colossus either, for all the original intent. Ovidio Copelli scored the model's maiden victory on the Stella Alpini in August 1952, with Elio Zagato the victor in the '54 Bari Three Hours, which was perhaps the biggest win accrued by an Ottu Vù. Ultimately, it was a useful competition tool at national level, finding greater success in

regional hillclimb and sprint races rather than on the international stage, as exemplified by the car seen here.

Built by Zagato at the behest of wealthy amateur Leo Veseley, and registered in January 1955, chassis 000062 was one of 13 (of the 24 believed bodied by the firm) to arrive at the Milan metal snippers as a bare chassis: the remainder had to be denuded of their factory shells before the build phase could commence. Entered in the Coppa del Mare e Monti in March of that year, the dairy magnate drove the car to sixth in class. Two weeks later he was third in the two-litre category on the XII Corsa sulle Torricelle before going for broke and entering May's Mille Miglia. He came home a highly respectable 39th overall out of 279 finishers. A return visit in 1956 saw him place 51st.

After repeatedly passing through assorted dealers over the next two years, and following a change of colour from red to an altogether more noticeable black with white stripes, it headed Stateside. According to the current custodian, Arthur Leerdam, the car was subsequently entered in two seasons of club racing in southern California by aviation engineer Bob Turner. 'He had ordered a Fiat 1100 coupé and then changed his order for a secondhand 8V. The seller [in Italy] sent him photos of a 'Rapi' car, so he was a bit surprised when he received a Zagato version. In 1958-'59, Bob

was chairman of the Convair Sports Car Club: I was able to track him down shortly before he passed away and he told me that a lot of the events he ran were in parking lots or at fairgrounds. His wife Carol also drove the car and raced against Phil Hill, Carroll Shelby and Dan Gurney at Riverside.'

The manifestly enthusiastic Belgian-based Dutchman bought the car in 2002, after retiring from racing. 'I wanted something Italian that would be fun to drive and told this to a dealer who lives in my hometown of Schilde. He said he'd just bought a car from Raymond Milo in California. In the early '60s, Bob Turner had stopped using the Ottu Vù and left it in his back yard. When I purchased the car, it had already been taken over to Italy for restoration. Fabio Calligaris from Inzago, near Milan, completed the bodywork and interior, but all the mechanical work was done by Jim Stokes.'

Already a concours winner, this 8V is about as close to perfect as is likely feasible. Not that Leerdam is overly protective of his beautiful baby. Once it has accrued the first few stone chips, he'll likely be happier: somehow you sense polishing cars isn't really his thing. Driving them hard is, and he pedals the Fiat with deft virtuosity.

Up close, the car is exquisite: tiny and improbably low. There's precious little styling tinsel; precious little of anything, as it doesn't even have a bootlid. The sharp creases running aft of the front wheelwells and along





Right and below

Unlike some examples, this 8V doesn't feature Zagato's 'double-bubble' roof; it's believed Zagato bodied 24 cars, all of them different to a greater or lesser extent.

Below

Current owner Arthur Leerdam cherishes many race plaques that date from his car's participation in Californian sports car events during 1958 and '59.



'It was all about proving that Fiat could build a thoroughbred sports car if it wanted to'

The flanks provide a visual break, stopping it short of appearing barrel-sided, the side-glazing treatment being reminiscent of the Ferrari 250GTZ and Alfa Romeo 1900SSZ.

Inside it's equally pared back. The vast Nardi roller, set high and vertical, fronts a metal dash, the semi-circular instrument binnacle of the standard car here replaced with more conventional gauges, most noticeably the prominent Jaeger revcounter. You sit low and slightly skewed but there are acres of head and elbowroom, the knee rest installed for the original owner a nice touch.

Ignition on, an inch of throttle and pull the plastic starter control: the 8V sounds eager with each flex of the accelerator as the carbs gulp and gurgle. Below 3000rpm, there's nothing. At all. More revs, change into second – there's synchro but you still need to blip on up and down changes so otherwise the cogs snatch a little – and the Fiat continues to make more noise than acceleration. Period figures quote a top speed of 118mph and 0-60mph time of 12 seconds for the regular 8V. In a higher state of tune, and with a smaller frontal area, this example is likely a fair bit faster but it's in the upper ranges that the car's performance really flourishes. Wind it up towards a shrill 6000rpm and you're making real progress, far more than

seems reasonable to expect from a two-litre sports car made over 50 years ago.

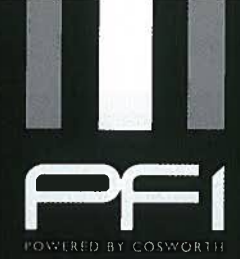
Similarly, you can only really appreciate the car's dynamic ability at speed. It seems to have been designed specifically for twisty back roads, the all-round independent suspension

making all the difference, as do the anti-roll bars at either end. Body roll is well contained, with understeer being the prevalent characteristic. The steering initially feels slovenly, too, yet the faster you go, the more lively and informative it gets, with little kickback or vibration.

You sense that this car was *engineered* for a purpose, rather than adapted to suit. This was all about proving to the wider world that Fiat could build a thoroughbred sports car if it wanted to. The elitist 8V was always going to sit uncomfortably in a proletarian model line-up and commercial success was patently of secondary importance. You're just left wishing that Fiat had followed through – but then, in assuming control of Ferrari at the end of the following decade, you could argue that it did. ▲

» Thanks to Boris Vervoordt for the use of his property 'Kanaal' for the photo shoot, and to Tony Adriaensens for the 'as found' photos taken in California.

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