

tale of the vanishing muscle car

This is the story of what appears to be one more endangered automotive species.

"Musclecar"—like "sports car" before it—is one of those useful terms which everyone understands although it was not invented until long after many such cars had already been built. The term itself apparently traces to *Car Life* magazine of the late 1960's. It was used generally to denote a mid-size vehicle which was practically of standard design except for optional factory installation of a super powerful engine and related high-performance equipment.

What were the first "proto-musclecars"—the ones which successfully established the genre long before it had any special name, and before anyone wrote all those pop songs on the subject? It's generally conceded that two postwar models must share the honors here: the '49 Oldsmobile Rocket (produced simply by making the new "98" V-8

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engine available in the lighter "88" chassis as well), and the '51 Hudson Hornet (created by making full use of the nearly-new six engine's potential for enlargement, and then adding one more essential feature: a chassis design whose proven roadability was entirely a match for all of the extra power). Both of these cars were naturals for the then-new sport of late-model stock car racing though they were not designed as racers.

Next after them came the 300 letter-series hemi-head Chrysler V-8—a fine engineering achievement airily dismissed by *Consumers' Union* magazine at the time as an "automotive Tyrannosaurus." Like the Olds and the Hudson, it was an unmistakable "muscle" vehicle despite being built on a full-size passenger-car chassis (few other sizes were available then). It, too, won racing laurels.

By that time there was no longer any question about the performance-car trend, and sullen grumbles about "the horsepower race" began to be heard from the same breed of critics who today find their chief satisfaction in trying righteously to outlaw anyone who dares to own a faster or shinier toy than they do themselves.

Prewar vehicles of the "musclecar" type are much harder to list. Special high-performance models had of course been built from the earliest years, and most of them are classics today (Mercer Raceabout, Kissel Gold Bug), but these were complete designs featuring special chassis and body as well as engine, so that they were affordable only by the few. Actually the best of them were true "sports" cars, though the term hadn't then yet come into use. There was also an occasional stock passenger car, such as the Hudson Super Six, which offered better-than-average performance, but only as a standard model—there was no special high-performance optional version. The highly practical production technique of optionally fitting an extra-powerful engine into a near-standard but relatively lightweight chassis had not yet caught on.

Admittedly, '33 Terraplane Eight owners may disagree with the above statement, as may also some owners of a '38-9 Buick Century. But those two models seem to be about the only exceptions; and unfortunately neither of them started any trend in the Depression era.

High performance in those days—what there was of it—was almost overwhelmingly an aftermarket matter, as

witness the much-modified Ford flathead V-8 and the legion of special parts for it available from various makers. Today this do-it-yourself approach is still very much with us, of course, and in fact may be almost the only available means at present of achieving acceptable performance with a late model vehicle.

However, there was one other approach to better performance which also began to grow during the 1930's. This was the optional factory-installed "performance package" for a given engine and car model, featuring such items as a higher-compression head, slightly hotter camshaft, etc. Hudson/Terraplane was again in the vanguard with its choice (for example) of 96 or 107 horsepower from the 3 x 5 Six. Some Brand X's even included a supercharger in the package, with resulting larger gain in optional available horsepower.

Though this "package" approach had only limited success before the war, it came fully into its own in the 1950's, giving us first Hudson Twin-H-Power, and shortly thereafter serving to launch the new small-block Chevrolet V-8 on its way to achievement and fame. The available selection of "power packages" continued to grow during the 1960's...sometimes to the bemusement of even sophisticated car buyers.

Evolution of performance vehicles suffered something of a setback during the "economy-car" fad circa 1958-63. However, even this yielded at least two beneficial results. First, the financial recovery of American Motors, and second, the development by several manufacturers of a compact or intermediate-size chassis which soon proved to be just right for performance-car applications as well.

A prime example of the latter was the '64 Pontiac Tempest GTO, now recognized by many as the first "real" musclecar. Although abandoning the interesting transaxle and "rope" driveshaft design of earlier Tempests, the GTO was a roaring success; and before you could say *Gran Turismo Omologato* it was also met by a sizable horde of imitators. Simultaneously the compact Ford Falcon chassis became the basis for the '64½ Ford Mustang, a runaway sales success which, despite its obvious lineal descent from the original '55-7 Ford Thunderbird, is considered the first of another new class of automobiles, called "Ponycars." Although the Mustang was not really a "performance" vehicle at first, it

soon did become available in several optional well-muscled versions—as did the competing ponycars rushed into production by other manufacturers.

As compared with a *pur sang* sports car, all of these performance vehicles embodied some inevitable compromises, which were dictated by market and production realities, the need for adequate space and acceptable ride, and so on. Yet the compromises were often remarkably successful. Taking the Hudson Hornet Six as example once again: here was a snarling, businesslike piece of machinery that could lick anything on the road with (so to speak) two cylinders tied behind its back; yet it remained a docile, comfortable—and outstandingly safe—family car at the same time. Later musclecars had varied success at resolving this sort of compromise, most of them depending upon extremely careful selection of options (tires, gearing, suspension) to manage it. Even at best, of course, sports-car purists were periodically heard taking exception to the results.

Nevertheless the "musclecar" design concept, combined with Sixties affluence and some production ingenuity, meant that for the first time in history it was possible for a sizable share of the population to own, drive, and enjoy a truly exciting high-performance vehicle, with power to spare and with handling qualities that, if not quite up to the sports-car standard, were still far above the mushmobile family-car level.

But it remained for the aging Hudson Hornet during those same years, the 1960's, to establish one more important trend: it was about the first U.S. musclecar-type vehicle to be recognized as a true "postwar collectible" or "special-interest car." Postwar sports models (Hudson Italia, Chevy Corvette, early T-Bird, Nash-Healey, Kaiser-Darrin) were already being recognized as collectibles. Today this trend is still growing and has expanded to include practically every type of musclecar, sports car, and other high-performance vehicle.

I know one young mechanic who is currently restoring his '69 Chevy Camaro Z-28 (the one with special 302 Trans-

An engine) as a "collector's item"—and indeed the car is already recognized as such by several automotive publications, and is quite rare. Like most such projects, the restoration is calling for more time and work than originally anticipated. But despite his impatience at having to drive something more prosaic in the meantime, it promises to be well worth all the extra effort and trouble.

On the other hand, there are only so many true high-performance autos left in existence. And in our interesting times, there probably will not be any more of them for a while. Such vehicles represent only one sector of the old-car hobby, it is true; and most of them are not even very old. But their place is a very special one. Although it is unlikely that they will ever become totally extinct, there is a very real possibility that they will end up just as have so many great cars before them: as excessively rare display pieces only, to be looked at, not driven.

The point is clear: unless the later performance models—the Hudson Hornet and all of its worthy successors, of whatever make—are properly cherished and preserved and maintained and driven from now on, there soon will come a generation which will know naught but government-approved underpowered horrors . . . and which will grow up thinking, presumably, that autos are supposed to be that way.

It is not a cheering prospect.