

# CUDA GRÂCE



1970 was the year when the muscle car wars peaked. You could buy as much brake horsepower straight off the showroom floor as you could afford, and a 'Cuda like this would have been the hottest ticket at the Plymouth dealership that didn't sport a Hemi.

*Words: Dave Smith Photography: Mike Key*

ABOVE: POWERHOUSE STYLING LIKE THIS MEANT THAT THE 'CUDA WAS ONE OF THE MOST RESPECTED MUSCLE CARS OF ITS ERA. IT ALSO ACCOUNTS FOR WHY IT IS SO SOUGHT-AFTER TODAY – WHAT ELSE ON THE ROAD LOOKS THIS FEARSOME?

**C**onsidering that the Barracuda went on to be one of the most fearsomely powerful, most sought-after muscle machines ever made, it made a pretty low-key entrance. Launched, rather unfortunately, on April 1st, 1964 as a mid-year model, it was in Plymouth dealers' showrooms by May ... just a few weeks after the Mustang had appeared and secured the new sports coupe marketplace for itself.

The Barracuda undercut the Mustang by just a few dollars, and while the Pony car was a dashing new design, the Plymouth was just a new hardtop coupe roof and huge, fastback rear window grafted onto the plain Valiant two-door body. It even carried Valiant badges to betray its rather mundane roots. The Mustang went on to outsell it nearly six-to-one in that first year.

Nothing changed much for 1965, although Plymouth did offer the Formula S package. This gave the buyer a 235bhp four-barrel version of the 273cu.in. Commando solid-lifter V8, heavy-duty suspension and wider wheels and tyres, though the car was still no match for a high-spec Mustang, and now even Ford were cashing

in on the fastback craze. Barracuda sales nearly tripled for 1965, possibly helped by the antics of one Richard Petty, who took a 426 Hemi-powered Barracuda drag racing in the B/Altered class, after NASCAR banned the Hemi from the oval tracks!

The car was even exported to Europe and the UK (in right-hand drive from 1967) the UK, and sold through an independent sole concessionaire called Warwick Wright. Its almost European styling would have helped it sell, and there are distinct similarities to the British Sunbeam Rapier of the same period – the Sunbeam looked a bit like a junior Barracuda! The Barracuda even won its class in the Monte Carlo Rally in the Sixties.

The 1966 model was released nearly two months after the rest of the Plymouth range, which was strange as it had hardly changed from the previous year! Sales were dropping off, so for 1967 Plymouth gave the Barracuda a new look. It lost its links to the workaday Valiant and became a model unto itself, and although the proportions stayed the same, the styling was all new.

The fastback lost the huge wraparound rear window, and a





ABOVE: HOCKEY-STICK STRIPE INCLUDES THE '440' CALL-OUT TO LEAVE ONLOOKERS IN NO DOUBT AS TO WHAT LIES UNDER THE HOOD. THE 440 WAS MAN ENOUGH TO ENSURE THAT MOST WOULD-BE STREET RACERS WERE LEFT WITH A DAMN GOOD VIEW OF THE GO-WING BOOT SPOILER AND SQUARE DUAL EXHAUST TIPS AS THE 'CUDA WENT THUNDERING TOWARD THE HORIZON

notchback and convertible joined the ranks. Better still was the introduction of the big-block 383cu.in. V8 as an option – and not a moment too soon for the power-crazed street-racers! The 383 Formula S came with twin exhausts, front disc brakes, and 0-60 in just 7.4 seconds.

1968 was a red-letter year for Mopar performance. Over at Dodge, the Charger had blossomed into the coke-bottle beauty we all know and love, the Coronet range sprouted the big-block Super Bee. As Coronet begat Super Bee, so Plymouth's Belvedere begat Road Runner, and every single one of them was stunningly beautiful. The same was true of the '68 Barracuda, which looked very much like the previous model year's offering, but now had the 318cu.in. as base V8 and the option of the new short-stroke 275bhp 340 or the big-block 383. Power aplenty, and as if that weren't enough, Plymouth even made some specially-built Hemi-powered examples available to professional Super Stock racers, if you asked your Chrysler dealer nicely enough! If you're really fortunate, you might find one of the 11 Savage GT Barracudas,

converted by an independent supplier to 440 power!

In 1969, the 'Cuda options package appeared for the first time. Ticking the right box on the order sheet would get you a 'Cuda with the 340cu.in. V8, four-speed manual transmission, hood scoops and various other goodies. There was a similar 'Cuda 383 option, too. Other options of varying degrees of desirability included the mid-year appearance of the 440 Magnum 375bhp, 480ft.lbs engine, and a yellow, flowered vinyl roof and floral upholstery package called the Mod Top. Nice! 0-60mph in 5.6 seconds with the 440 meant nobody could catch you, while the vinyl roof meant nobody would want to!

1970 heralded the completely redesigned Barracuda range with its long-hood-short-deck, Coke-bottle styling. Tremendously handsome and aggressive-looking, the fastback had gone, and the range was now split into three distinct series – the base Barracuda, the slightly plusher Gran Coupe and the top line, simply called the 'Cuda, all available as hardtops or convertibles. The 'Cuda had a 383cu.in. V8, and could be ordered with the 'Shaker' hood scoop,





ABOVE: THIS 'CUDA IS A TEXT-BOOK EXAMPLE OF CONCOURS-WINNINGLY STRAIGHT BODYWORK. FROM EVERY ANGLE, IT'S FLAWLESS, AND THAT TOR RED PAINT LOOKS DEEP ENOUGH TO DROWN IN. MOPARS IN THIS CONDITION ARE FETCHING CRAZY MONEY IN THE STATES RIGHT NOW, SO LET'S HOPE THIS ONE STAYS RIGHT HERE ...

so called because the scoop was attached to the carburettor and poked through a hole in the bonnet. Thus, when the engine was revved up, the scoop could be seen shaking while the bonnet stood still!

'Cuda engine options ranged from wild to scary. The standard 383 was good for 335bhp, but \$131 extra would buy you a Super Commando 440 engine with 375bhp, or \$250 extra for the toughened-up 390bhp 440+6 six-barrel engine. The insatiably power-hungry could spend \$871 for the rip-roaring 425bhp (and the rest ... ) 426cu.in. Street Hemi, but for best all-round performance on the street, the 440+6 was hard to beat. Only 666 'Cudas had Hemi power this year, and if you happen to find a 1970 Hemi'Cuda convertible in a barn, snap it up quick! There were only 14 made, and when they do change hands they fetch inconceivably huge sums of money. Motor Trend tested a 440+6 'Cuda in 1970 and covered the quarter in 14.4 seconds at 99.88mph, while Car Craft did the same trip in a Hemi'Cuda in 13.1 at 107.

Little changed for 1971, the most noticeable change being the grille, which now housed twin headlamps and deep, pigeon-hole style slots in the grille. A bargain-basement coupe was added to the Barracuda line which gave you all the looks of the handsome Mopar sportster but with a 198cu.in. 125bhp base Valiant six-pot motor. This was to be the last year for the Street Hemi option, the 440 four-barrel and also for the Barracuda'Cuda convertibles, so if Auntie Winnifred has left you one of the seven '71 Hemi 'Cuda ragtops made in her will, you can start choosing your island in the Pacific now. And yes, Nash Bridges' Hemi'Cuda convertible is a clone, apparently.

By now, government and environmental pressures, plus spiralling insurance costs, had put real high-performance muscle cars out of reach of most Americans, and the Barracuda's marketplace almost died overnight. For 1972, the model range was slashed to just the Barracuda and the 'Cuda in hardtop form only. The standard engine

for the formerly-hi-po 'Cuda was now a two-barrel 318, boasting 150bhp net, although they were now the finest-handling Barracudas ever. The only engine option was the four-barrel 340, with 240bhp, and sales fell way below 20,000.

Plymouth stopped any reference to muscle cars or pony cars, and began referring to them as 'speciality compacts'. In 1973, sales picked up a little, and although the straight-six base engine was dropped from the range, the V8s were a shadow of their former selves. Otherwise, the car was unchanged, and remained so until the end of the '74 model year, after which the Barracuda was dropped. The 1974 option of the 245bhp 360cu.in. engine failed to win many buyers, though they're now very rare and highly sought-after, and the series bowed out with less than 12,000 sales in its last year.

Plymouth made the prime example of Mopar's finest that you see here whilst they were still at the forefront of Detroit muscle. This example belongs to a gentleman from Oldham who knows a thing or two about Mopar muscle; Richard Ward. You might remember that we featured his 1970 Dodge Hemi Challenger back in the March 2001 issue? Well this 1970 'Cuda 440+6 is his other car ... not counting his Mustang 2+2 which is currently receiving a 5.0 injection motor transplant! Muscle cars? Yep, Richard definitely knows a thing or two!

Richard found the car advertised in the back of a classic car magazine back in 1997. Unfortunately, it was in Stockholm, Sweden, so Richard took a trip over to see the car, liked it, bought it and drove it back home, via Harwich! It was in fantastic condition, having been restored to a very high standard in the States in the late Eighties before export to Sweden. Richard hasn't had much work to do on the car, although he did have to replace one of the cylinder heads which had cracked.

The 'Cuda is very nicely equipped and optioned - it has the \$97 Shaker hood, the Go-Wing boot spoiler, bonnet pins, body-coloured





ABOVE: HIDING UNDERNEATH THAT BIG 'SHAKER' HOOD SCOOP ARE THREE TWO-BARREL CARBURETTORS. GENTLE CRUISING AROUND TOWN USES ONLY THE CENTRE CARBURETTOR, BUT WHEN THE PEDAL TOUCHES THE METAL, ALL THE CARBS OPEN UP TO ALLOW LOTS OF FRESH, COLD AIR AND BUCKET-LOADS OF FUEL IN. CONTEMPORARY ROAD-TESTERS COULD MAKE A 440-6 PERFORM NEARLY AS WELL AS A HEMI ON THE STRIP

elastomeric bumpers, leather bucket seats, 15-inch Rallye wheels and a Hurst pistol-grip shifter on the tough A833 four-speed manual gearbox.

Best of all, though, is the extra \$250 spent ordering that six-pack 440cu.in. engine, with its trio of two-barrel carburetors. This makes for easy cruising around town using only the centre carburettor, but when Richard floors the throttle, the other four carb throats open and the 'Cuda heads for the horizon like a cruise missile! In fact, he reckons that the big 440 will return up to 18mpg if driven gently, but the Six-Pack motor, being far more tractable at low revs, will cleanly beat a Hemi to the eighth-mile before the Elephant motor's superior top-end

performance pushes it ahead. Also, the chances of a Hemi ever seeing 18mpg are very slim!

Currently, the 'Cuda is down on the south coast with Richard's friend and fellow Mopar-man Jim Wilson, while Rich has Jim's car up in Oldham for some work. What's Jim's car? A Hemi'Cuda! Richard is certainly the man to trust for the work, though – anybody who saw this Hi-Impact EV2 Tor Red (the Plymouth equivalent of Hemi Orange) 440+6 on the *Classic American* stand at the Car of the Year finals last year couldn't fail to notice how perfect the whole car is. Despite the lighting at the NEC being very unforgiving, the 'Cuda was a lesson in straight bodywork and perfect paint – however, the less well-informed punters at the NEC could be heard to mumble something about the *Dukes of Hazzard* at least once every few minutes!

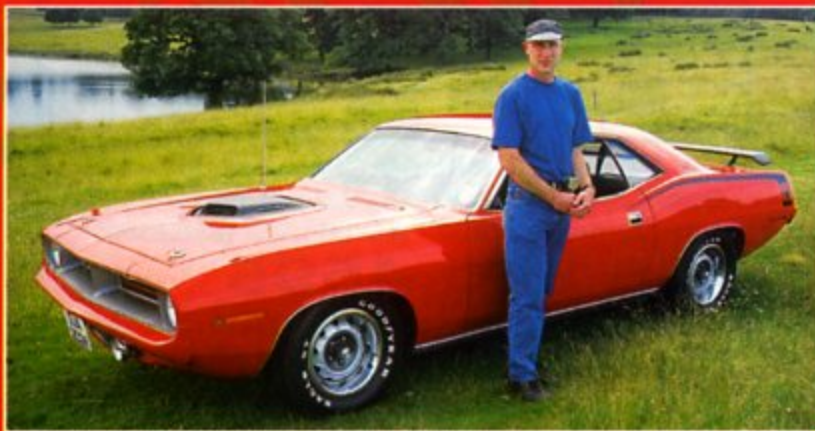
The 'Cuda only sees about 1500 road miles a year, not because Richard's frightened to use it but because he has to toss a three-sided coin to decide which of his cars to take out each Summer weekend! Nevertheless, it still finds its way to shows and to the strip for some proper use as its makers intended. The ultimate street-racer? Maybe, but if anyone ever asks you what 'muscle car' means, show them a picture of this 'Cuda – it's a dead cert!



Many thanks to Tony Oksien of the Mopar Muscle Association for his help with compiling this feature. 📷

LEFT: BLACK LEATHER BUCKET SEATS, A PISTOL-GRIP FOUR-ON-THE-FLOOR, NO CONSOLE – THIS MOTOR MEANS BUSINESS!





**TATTON PARK'S** Car of the Year heat winner was Richard Ward's beautiful Plymouth 'Cuda. An older restoration from the States, Richard brought his vivid orange 'Cuda home to Oldham from a chap in Sweden around three years ago. Sporting a 440cu.in. six-pack motor backed by a four-speed gearbox, Richard's orange terror has turned 14-second runs at 102mph down the strip in street trim.

That's right, he's not afraid to use this car, and he puts around 3000 miles on the clock every year; in fact, that's what endeared this car to us. Not only is the car super-straight and gorgeous-looking, but it is used as family transport too. Yep, this car gets used, as does Richard's other pride and joy, a '70 Hemi Challenger. Hopefully we'll have a feature on that coming your way soon. Stay tuned!

