

It may have been Chrysler's 'economy' Division, but that all changed in the 1960s when Plymouth suddenly became one of America's greatest power sources. **TONY OKSIEN** looks back at the glory days of the Plymouth muscle car era

FROM the inception of the Plymouth Motor Company way back in 1928, the marque was renowned for its low-budget, no-frills, workhorse-like vehicles. The connection between the Pilgrim Fathers who landed at Plymouth Rock and that of solid, dependable, value-for-money motor cars gave the Division a stability that saw the Pentastar through many a lean period, as detailed elsewhere in this issue.

The 1960s though, brought a definite swing towards more exciting vehicles, in terms of both styling and performance. Plymouth had to respond to America's new 'need for speed' car buyers with vehicles they would appreciate. And respond it did - in awesome fashion.

1962 will go down in Plymouth's history as the time when horsepower truly ruled the roost, with the Super Stock Belvederes and Savoy's unleashed on a public that craved increasingly faster machines. With the awesome 413cu.in. Max Wedge RB motor fitted in a lightweight, no-frills, two-door sedan, the cars quickly became the hottest combo on the drag strip; Tom Grove pushed his Super Stock Plymouth to an ET of 11.93 seconds at 118.75 mph in July 1962.

This was the first stock passenger vehicle to achieve a sub-12 second quarter mile pass. These stripped-out cars could be further lightened by deleting the radio, heater and sound deadening, creating a 3000lb. killer combination along with Chrysler's bullet-proof Torqueflite auto transmission, push-button operated of course. The 413cu.in. powerplant came with twin Carter AFB carbs on a low rise inlet manifold, helping to push the output figures up to a whopping 410bhp. Those Chevs, Pontiacs and Fords never stood a chance as Mopower rode roughshod over the Big Buck losers.

The following year, 1963, became even more of a nightmare

MUS BOW



1962 TWO-DOOR BELVEDERE



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for the big two as the 413 turned into a 426 Max Wedge, with a cross-ram twin 4bbl induction system sitting virtually on the inner fenders, good for 415bhp under the guise of a Stage II engine. But the Stage III went even further, with bigger carbs, higher lift cam, larger chamber heads and a horsepower rating of 425bhp. This non-idling monster found its way into Plymouth's lightened intermediates which went straight to the strips and trounced the opposition.

Yet there was more to come, for over the winter of '63, Chrysler engineers worked on an engine that would make their divisions almost unbeatable - on the strip, the race track or the street. It was the 426cu.in. Hemi head big block.

The engine debuted on February 23rd, 1964 at the Daytona 500. The qualifying sessions gave the best indication to the racing fraternity that something 'special' had arrived, as out of a starting field of 46 cars the first seven positions were either Dodges or Plymouths. Paul Goldsmith held pole position in his Plymouth Belvedere; next to him sat Richard Petty in his #43. The race programme stated that these cars were

powered by 'Chrysler Corporation's Hemispherical Combustion Chamber Maximum Performance Engine'. Put more simply: the Hemi.

That day, racing history was made and a legendary engine born. Petty crossed the line first, with second and third places also being taken by Plymouth race cars. To emphasise the engine's versatility, the Dodge and Plymouth factory drag cars were built and set up for the strip with a 12.5:1 compression ratio and a factory rating of 425bhp at 6000rpm. The racers who knew better obviously twigged that this bhp figure was on the conservative side.

Factory-backed Plymouth race teams, such as the Golden Commandos with Al 'The Lawman' Eckstrand at the wheel, and Jim Melrose of the 'Melrose Missile' fame, kept the Division's expectations flying high. 1965 saw the Hemi engine banned from NASCAR, though Richard Petty built up a



LIGHTWEIGHT RACING HEMI PLYMOUTH FROM '65



MUSCLE BOUND!

Barracuda with Hemi Super Stock power and took the blue 43 to the nation's drag strips.

1966 saw the Hemi back in NASCAR competition, as well as a Street Hemi version available to the public. Plymouth chose its 116in. wheelbase, two-door base Belvederes to mount their GTO and Mustang challenge, and Satellites could also be found with Hemi power. For '67, the big news for performance buyers was the Belvedere GTX, a plush supercar propelled by the biggest GT engine in the world: the 440cu.in., 375bhp unit named Super Commando. The wedge was standard, with the 426 Hemi an option.

It wasn't too long before the likes of Sox and Martin took the 'X' to the strip and blew away the pretenders. Plymouth sold 12,010 GTX models in 1967. The Road Runner was a performance version of the newly restyled Belvedere and made its debut on the world's automotive stage in the autumn of the same year.

Plymouth's idea had been to give lots of performance in a low-priced package (Road Runner base price: \$3034), and gave the car its own 'unique' 383 Road Runner engine. It delivered 335bhp at 5200rpm, increasing the horsepower over Chrysler's three other versions of the 383. This achievement was simplified by the use of 440cu.in. Super Commando heads and camshaft, which gave 425lb.ft. of torque at 3400rpm. Road Runner's engine came with a large runner manifold and a punched-out 4bbl Carter AVS carb; also included was the 440's crankcase windage tray, HiPo manifolds with twin exhausts and a super cool, black crinkle finished, unsilenced air cleaner.

Having 'leased' the Road Runner cartoon character from Warner Bros., Plymouth's advertising agency went into overdrive. Slogans such as 'Beep Beep Eeeyyowww! Plymouth tells it like it is' and 'Brilliant Performance - Private Property of the Young and Aware' adorned the inside pages of car magazines and newspapers throughout the States.

Nobody could have missed the fact that Wile. E Coyote was in BIG trouble. The 'poor man's muscle car' exceeded all the company's expectations, the factories churning out 29,240 coupes and 15,359 hardtops. The car that would become the division's main performance model for the next five years had entered service with a Bang for a Buck.

Chrysler released an all new, small block V8 engine for 1968. The 340cu.in. lump pumped out 275bhp and found its way into Plymouth's Barracuda under the guise of a





‘THE ‘POOR MAN’S MUSCLE CAR’ EXCEEDED ALL THE COMPANY’S EXPECTATIONS, THE FACTORIES CHURNING OUT 29,240 COUPES AND 15,359 HARDTOPS’



LEFT: '67 440cu.in. GTX 4 TOP: '69 HEMI ROAD RUNNER BELOW RIGHT: PLYMOUTH'S 1970 NASCAR WEAPON, THE SUPERBIRD ABOVE: HEMI 'CUDA FOR '71 BECAME THE LAST OF THE BREED

'Formula S' package, not only handling well with the aid of the latest suspension technology, but also stopping well thanks to the use of front discs. It was to become a stout performer on the street, blowing away many an unsuspecting big block.

1969 saw the Plymouth Division improve its performance theme as the Road Runner grabbed *Motor Trend* magazine's Car of the Year award with a limited 440cu.in. 6bbl Runner, complete with glassfibre lift-off hood and outrageous scoop. It certainly paved the way for even more excesses in the styling department.

Richard Petty jumped ship to Ford for the '69 Nascar season, the reason apparently being that '... slab sided B-Bodies are just uncompetitive on the ovals'. A severely miffed Plymouth lured him back for 1970 with the Superbird, a droop snoped, high winged version of the Runner. This did the trick as Plymouth went in search of the stock car crown. To satisfy the racing authorities, a batch of 2000 Birds were built for public consumption; to this day that figure cannot be confirmed, but the limited edition cars are seen as the ultimate excesses of an industry bent on the need for speed.

The Barracuda also came in for a complete restyle, moving its designation from A to E-Body as the company finally tried to get to grips with the Firebird/Camaro/Mustang market. For the first time, a Plymouth car could accept – and had optioned – every powerplant the factory offered, from the 225cu.in. 'six' right through to the ground-pounding Hemi. The muscle version, designated 'Cuda', could be found with 340, 383, 440, 440+6bbl or 426 units. A Hemi Cuda could run the quarter

mile in 13 seconds and accelerate to 60mph in six seconds.

This machine just might be the ultimate muscle car ever built by a mainstream company. A brand new car, known as Duster, took over the A-Body mantle which utilised the potent 340 for its quickest versions.

1971 saw the Road Runner rebodied into a heavier, almost luxury car. The Cuda continued but the 440 was dropped and it became the final year for convertibles.

The Duster stood firm but the US government's emission laws, requiring engines to run no lead/low lead fuel, started to bite into the industry, resulting in the end of Plymouth's muscle car era. It had been a glorious, fascinating time for Plymouth and one that will never be forgotten. But, of course, all good things have a habit of coming to an end. It took Chrysler another two decades before it returned to being an innovative, experimental and adventurous manufacturer all over again. ★

