

Dodge Charger **Muscle Car Articles**

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By Ross Lombard

The Dodge Charger was one of the first of the euphemistically termed 'muscle cars' to be made available in large numbers. In answer to the Mustang and Barracuda Dodge brought out in 1966 their answer, the Charger. Based on the mid-size Coronet, this new and sleek fastback soon became a big seller, partially because of its styling but largely because of its massive engine.

The standard, yet impressive 318 V8 (230 bhp) engine was very often ignored in favour of the up-graded 383 V8 (335 bhp), but if you really wanted the ultimate the Hemi 426 engine, giving up to 500 bhp, was very much developed as a racing engine, and applied to the Charger became a winner. The considerable extra cost and very limited warranty of these engines however meant that only 468 were built, as opposed to over 37,000 in 1966 alone of the more standard Chargers.

The following year, the 440 Magnum was introduced (375 bhp and Chrysler's biggest engine), and with a dramatic redesign of the styling which in 1968 saw a big leap in sales for the Charger. The engines were roughly the same as previous versions with the incredibly fast Hemi engines still being built for the more specialist speed purchaser, particularly for drag racing.

1969 saw two 'muscle cars' hit the market. The first was the Charger 500, built for the NASCAR tournaments with some success, and then the famous Dodge Charger Daytona with its elongated bonnet and wing at the back, both for down-force. The Daytona had either the 440 or the 426 Hemi engines and over 500 were sold in that year. This was a street-legal racing car, and although it was not very roadworthy, in a straight line, and on the track it would manage over 150 mph. In the same year some 20,000 Chargers were made.

A new design occurred the following year with a greater choice of engines, colours and packages, the already fast Hemi engines being further refined and the standard engines being modified. The top of the range Chargers with Hemi engines were improved and the standard engines changed to a 3 barrel carburettor rather than 4 and achieved even greater performance than before.

The insurance market had increased its premiums quite drastically though, and so only 10,000 vehicles were sold during 1970, with less than 200 of the super fast models.

For various reasons 1971 saw the decrease in engine size in most of the auto firms cars, and although yet another new design for the Charger was produced which would last for another three years, emission control regulations effectively decided the end of the Hemi engines in Chargers by the end of the year.

In 1972 Chrysler had to start detuning its engines to come within yet more regulations, and whilst retaining the 1971 style, but less sales resulted.

In an effort to increase sales yet another re-styling was brought in the following year, and more and more options were available to make up for the inevitable loss of performance necessitated by emission regulations.

The last Chargers to be classed as performance vehicles were made in 1974, and whilst Chargers continued to be produced, they were now looked at as luxury cars as opposed to high performance sports cars. Production of these models stopped in 1978.

Between 1983 and 1987 a front wheel drive, subcompact hatchback took over the name Charger, but was not as successful as hoped.

Nowadays Dodge Chargers are very much still in the luxury car market with a choice of six new models, all of which have state-of-the-art pretty much everything, from stereos to brakes and engines to gearboxes. Hemis are again the choice of engines, between 3.5 and 6.1 litres. The interiors are as plush as you will get.

Of course the technology, luxury and styling have all developed over the years, but the early Chargers are still considered by many as being one of the real classics as far as sheer muscle is concerned and are highly sought after today.

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