

Hemi Life



Two days on the road in a Charger powered by a legend... is it really all that?

Words and photography by David Traver Adolphus

This is a car we wanted to see for years, but for the second time, we didn't think we'd get the chance. The Texan owner wasn't going to be home, and he wasn't exactly going to hand over the keys to some damn Yankee, was he? It's not like he could replace it if something went wrong.

There are plenty of "one of ones," but let's be honest: For most of them, you have to dive deep into the option sheet to find out that what makes them unique is the combination of drip rails, remote mirror and rear-end ratio. That's reaching. We do it, too, but it's still reaching, and late at night when it's just you, it's hard to say that car is truly unique.

So when you can call a car "one of one" with just a few words, and they're a few words from the top of the fender tag, then you're getting somewhere. They're good words: Hemi. Four-speed. Triple black. And that's it—Dodge only built one triple-black four-speed 1970 Hemi Charger R/T. It's hard to

think of any way you could improve on that. Put it in a top-10 list of regular production cars, and no one would object.

You'll hear people say that there were thousands of Hemis built, so what makes them so special? And sure, it was a mass-production engine, but when you start to look at individual models, you realize it was never served up in big quantities, ordered in an average of a little over 150 cars of any given model each year. The vast bulk of Hemi engines were built in three years, 1966, '68 and '69; by 1970, production dropped off sharply, to 1,543.

The '70 Charger was fundamentally unchanged from 1968-'69, although the new grille with big wraparound chrome

bumper made it easy to tell apart from the prior year; it also had an easy-to-spot new hood and fenders and, for R/T models, new side scoops on the doors. There weren't many of them, though: 112 1970 Hemi Charger R/Ts for the American market and another dozen for Canada (those numbers have occasionally been disputed). All of which is to say, Bill Parodi's feature car isn't replaceable, and we probably weren't going to find another one of the 56 four-speeds to drive.

We were sad, then, when we found out that Bill was out of town when we were in the Austin area last spring, and that the car was going to fall through again. And then we got happy, because Bill just said, "The hell with it," and threw us the keys.

The Hemi is quite literally not just a car you can jump in and drive, because after sitting with crummy ethanol-laden gas in the tank over the winter, it wasn't going anywhere. Mechanic Larry Drozd at Jeff's Resurrections, where it was restored, ended up taking off the Carter AFBs and going through them on his bench. In an otherwise stock car, Bill has a high-lift Comp Cams Big Mutha' Thumpr camshaft (he likes being shaken around at idle), so the car was extremely cold blooded. It took a solid 20 minutes before it was sufficiently warmed up for normal driving, and we idled and putted around and burned up all the crummy old gas before putting in a tank of good stuff. Then we hit the road.



Business in the front, party in the back. It's hard to believe all that engine hides under the slender hood, but it's a big car.

A Street Hemi is not like any other engine. The idea behind most big-blocks is to make a lot of torque at low RPM, which is fun. The Hemi is the complete opposite—as Larry said when he put this car on the dyno, “Hemis keep making power, the curve just goes straight up and never drops until you throw the rods out of it. All the other engines, the curve will taper off.” Larry backed off at 5,600 RPM, which was probably a few thousand RPM away from where the real power is (even stock 426 Hemis made true peak power right around 6,000 RPM, despite the factory rating taken at 5,000). But as Larry said, it wasn't his car.

It wasn't ours, either, and we didn't do anything crazy in it, but the poor thing clearly needed some exercise, so we headed for the hills. We certainly didn't do anything as crazy as Bill did, who, on the day after it was completed in 2006, took it to

Scottsdale to join the cruise to the Mopars at the Strip event in Las Vegas—about 400 miles at sometimes serious speeds.

“We literally unloaded the car, fired it up and took off into the desert,” he said. “The car sliced through the cool desert air like an arrow and the Hemi just begged to be run at higher RPM all day long! It was the first time I had ever driven my dream Hemi and the ride lasted an entire day... what could be better?”

Fun for Bill, but the memory still makes Larry cringe. “When I finished the car, the engine had about three hours of run time on it. I had to hand-finish every rocker arm and I wasn't too confident they would hold up...”

Still, it was fully restored, and it had been a pleasure to work with: “The car still had its complete and original drivetrain, including all factory parts down to the belts, hoses, clamps, plug wires, etc.,” said

Bill. “It was a true 53,000-mile car that had been well cared for and garage stored.”

Despite the healthy aftermarket cam (.507/.494-inch lift, versus the stock .484/.475), it's not a hard car to drive around town, and we liked the big idle, too. It kind of deserves it—it's a Hemi Charger, it should let you and everyone else know what's going on, and it makes you feel pretty badass. It would have been less fun with a TorqueFlite, because stalling at idle would have likely been a problem.

It's a nice interior, with room to wear a big-brimmed black western hat. That and dark shades are necessary, if you don't want to feel underdressed in the charcoal and black interior. Positioning is good, with a clutch pedal that seems too high at first, before you discover how long the travel is. It engages down at the bottom, which works out great for double-clutching. You might not have to do that, but we never



They say the sail panels make it unstable, but we found the car steadier when we got it over 65. Maybe at 130 it gets weird.

tried downshifting without, because what kind of people would we be if we didn't take every opportunity to rev it up?

Around town, it was a struggle not to grin too much, which would totally have ruined the vibe. The first day, we didn't end up stretching it too much, as we were trying to get in photography next to the world-famous Louie Mueller Barbecue. A woman in a Jetta parked in front of the car and walked past without looking twice, which made us think there is something wrong with the world. Later, we parked it next to a Mr. Norm Dart in the Jeff's Resurrections shop, owned by Jeff Snyder, and felt better.

We headed back into Taylor the next morning in Jeff's new GMC dually (we drove that, too, and it was a great rig). “Where to?” we asked Jeff, who was shotgun for the day. He didn't care. We took off.

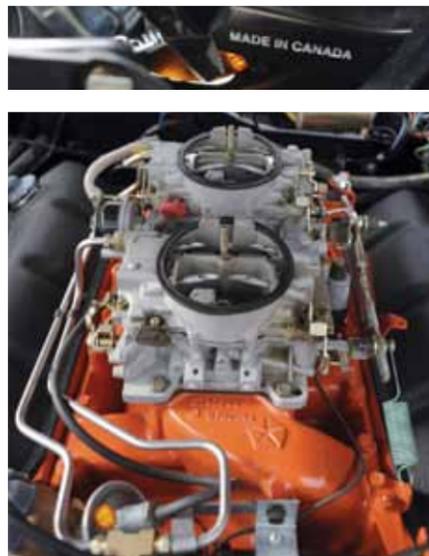
We're sure that if you were willing to

live with the need to run it over 6,000 RPM, the car would be a stoplight champion, even with 3.54 Track Pak gears. As Bud Lindemann said on the TV program *Car and Track* back when this car was new, “with this four-letter exciter hung on each side, you won't find too many takers at the traffic lights.” Yet we don't think that suits the car's personality. The big B-body didn't make us want to own the intersections, though it told us to own the Interstate, so we found some open road.

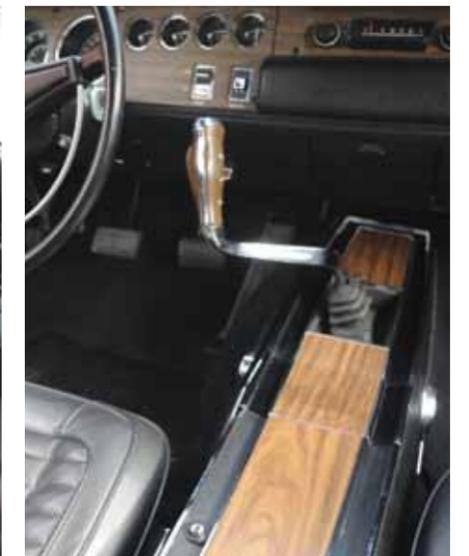
Either way, you do need to get used to the power band. Larry only found 318hp and 384-lbs.ft. on his 5,600 RPM dyno runs. That's at the rear wheels, though, but it's why Jeff kept after us to get on it more. Okay, fine. At 60 MPH, you already feel like you should be looking for a fifth gear, but it's only just starting to get some pull. It's also only just starting to settle down. Even with BFG Radial T/As, it was

darty and floaty and wandered, especially between about 35 and 60. It didn't really feel planted until around 65 or 70, when it very quickly transitioned to stability. It doesn't have the '69 Charger 500's fast-back, but must have benefited from some aerodynamic testing. The speed where it gets confident, coincidentally, puts you right up into the upper rev range when you downshift to pass.

That's something you really need to figure out how to do at least once in your life. It was amazing to us that people seeing this car in their rear view didn't just pull over and hide in the ditch until we were gone, but as we said, there's something wrong with some people. So do that double clutch thing and really get the RPM up high, because things are about to explode. It's the big Pistol Grip in a Dodge, and it reminds you about the seriousness of your undertaking: You're about to put a four-



Bearings were DOA in 2006, but every component and accessory remained original end to end. A cam is the only change from stock.



Only front seat covers, a carpet and headliner were replaced. Everything else, including dash and gauges, is completely original.

I have always been a huge fan of the second-generation Chargers, particularly 1970 cars, and had kept my eyes and ears open for a Hemi car since the mid-'80s. I'm partial to four-speeds, good colors and solid, original cars, so the right car eluded me for almost 20 years! Then, during the Mopar feeding frenzy of 2005, I learned that Bill Weimann (an avid collector of high-end Mopar muscle) had acquired a triple-black, four-speed Hemi Charger, one which I never knew existed.

I contacted Bill and learned that the car had been found in a collection in North Dakota, was in completely unrestored, original condition and hadn't seen the light of day for a couple of decades. Although Mr. Weimann had no intention of selling the car (which he hadn't even seen yet), he reluctantly threw out a price. Knowing how quickly a guy like Bill can change his mind, I wired the asking price to his account immediately and a friend of mine (Ronnie "Bones" Melvin) was heading north with trailer in tow the very next morning.

Within 48 hours, the Hemi Charger was on Texas soil. No way I was going to let this car get away from me. What's funny is that a few days later, Bill Weimann called me to find out what I thought about the deal we had discussed on the Charger; I could barely contain myself when I informed him that the money hit his account days ago and I already had the car at my shop... priceless! — *Bill Parodi*



speed Hemi Charger into the go zone.

It's on the cam now, as the skinny needle in the Tic-Toc-Tach starts to stand up. Easing into the throttle seems like a good idea; a second or two and your foot goes to the floor and the front end comes up an inch or two. How fast, now? Clearly enough to get out of the trouble behind you and into the trouble ahead. Pull back into the lane and let engine braking take it down a moment, then back into fourth, which now doesn't seem so unreasonably low after that trip into Hemi land. This is exactly what it's geared for. Now we were headhunting, looking for another victim to eat alive. It started to make some real noise from the rectangular tips and the heads came around as we passed, wide eyes and open mouths. Now you know what a real car looks like. Don't forget it.

She's on a good long 117-inch wheelbase, and in front still has the proven Mopar suspension, augmented in a Hemi car with the thick torsion bars. Aside from

the light front end at moderate speeds, it does really well on these good Texas roads and the steering doesn't have a dead zone to speak of. Since you want to keep the speed up over 60, it pays to attack the big sweepers and trust the car to stay planted. At no point did it do anything scary or unpredictable. We've said it before and done it before: You can steer a big-engine B-body with the rear end, but in this car, we didn't care to risk an excursion into wrinkled rockers... or worse. Honestly, we weren't even tempted. The grin we seared into our face from perfectly legitimate two-lane antics required sophisticated orthodontia to remove.

With the car nice and hot, we stopped a couple of times: for meals, for pump gas, and in Bartlett, Texas, for the beauty shots you see. We were worried about vapor lock or other misbehavior, but with our normal pump-once-and-hold-it-halfway technique, the Hemi started every time, even when we positioned

The WPC Club, Inc.

Box 3504
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49003-3504
www.chryslerclub.org
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1970 Dodge Charger Registry

644 W. Louthier Street
Carlisle, Pennsylvania 17013
1970chargerregistry.com
Dues: free • Membership: 2,845

PROS

- + The 4-3 downshift
- + Knowing there's nothing badder
- + Looks like a Death Star on wheels

CONS

- No overdrive
- Cost prohibitive
- Had to give it back

it multiple times for more photography. Driving back home at dusk, tires humming, light on gas money and the car coated with dust, we knew this had been a peak supercar experience. Envy the few dozen people who can do it at will; and yell at them if they let their cars sit. Someone needs to be experiencing this at every possible moment.

We'd essentially paid lip service to the Hemi mystique for years. We'd seen the cars, spent a half-hour or 45 minutes behind the wheel every now and then. But on some level, we just didn't get it. Did it seem like a great engine? Of course, but there are lots of great engines. A 289 is great, a 327 is great, the Slant Six is great. It wasn't until we had the time to relax and settle into the car that we finally really understood.

The Hemi is different. The Hemi is better. Nothing else asks you to give it the juice like this, and when you do nothing else, it just sits there and smirks at you and says, "Is that all you got?" It's like one of those great racehorses from a story that will just pull and pull and never stop trying until its heart explodes. As far as we're concerned, this is just about the greatest muscle car ever built. 🍌



It came from North Dakota with a solid body and no major holes. They almost saved the vinyl top, but it tore during removal for roof dent repair.