



THE LOUD, PROUD
AGE OF THE

AMERICAN MUSCLE CAR

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THE BARELY CONTAINED POWER OF A GROWLING ENGINE EVOKES DREAMS OF THE OPEN ROAD. IN ALEXANDER CITY, WELLBORN MUSCLECAR MUSEUM KEEPS THE ERA OF THE VINTAGE HOT ROD ALIVE.



For auto enthusiasts, the American muscle car represents the glory days of fire-breathing engines, head-turning style, and road-scorching speed. The names still resonate: the Dodge Charger and Challenger, Plymouth Barracuda and Road Runner, Ford Mustang, Pontiac GTO, and so on, available in high-performance, built-to-thrill versions. The breed began with stock-car racing, which has roots in the souped-up cars Southern moonshiners used to elude police in hot pursuit. “The muscle car



era started around 1964 with the rise of NASCAR racing,” explains uber-enthusiast Tim Wellborn. “NASCAR wouldn’t let drivers race engines that weren’t available to the public—so the carmakers made them available. It was the first time in history that you could get a true NASCAR race engine in your street car. You had cars capable of more than 150 miles per hour.”

The great American muscle car reached its peak from 1969 to 1971. In 1972 the federal government restricted compression ratios, limiting engine





power. By then, insurance premiums for the cars were rising sharply (and the spike in gas prices during the 1970s energy crisis didn't help). Over decades, Wellborn and his wife, Pam, assembled a world-class collection of muscle cars, almost all 1969–1971 models. And since 2010 they've been on view in the Wellborn Musclicar Museum, housed in a former car dealership in Alexander City. "This is the best muscle car collection open to the public," he says.

Earlier this year the Wellborns sold 18 of their cars at a record-setting auction that netted some 4 million dollars (top price: \$900,000 for a 1969 Dodge Hemi Daytona). But even post-sale, their museum remains muscle-car heaven, a temple of rolling thunder. The collection has always emphasized Chrysler makes, especially cars powered by Chrysler's massive Hemi engine (named for its hemispherical cylinder heads). And thereby hangs a tale. On display is the 1971 Dodge Hemi Charger Tim's father bought that year. "As a kid you're impressed by what your father does," he says. "I'd sit in that car, listen to rock music on the radio, and dream of driving it. My father kept the key hidden from me when I started to drive, which is why I'm still here and it's still here!"

The old dealership's spacious garage is the perfect setting for a dazzling array of Detroit iron and memorabilia. Vintage car-logo signs hang on the walls and from the ceiling. The influence of the era's psychedelic graphics shows up in everything from vintage ads to eye-candy body-paint hues such as Plum Crazy and Top Banana. Some cars have been restored with great care and expense, while others are what Wellborn calls "survivors"—in original condition, including factory paint, and much prized by collectors. Some sport car-lot antenna pennants (remember those?)



IN ADDITION TO ITS IMPRESSIVE COLLECTION OF MUSCLE CARS, THE MUSEUM TAKES ADVANTAGE OF ITS SPACIOUS GARAGE SPACE TO DISPLAY VEHICULAR MEMORABILIA LIKE CAR LOGO SIGNS AND OTHER PERIOD ARTIFACTS THAT MAKE YOU FEEL LIKE YOU'VE STEPPED BACK IN TIME.



WHILE GEARHEADS WILL FIND A VERITABLE HEAVEN AT THIS ALEXANDER CITY GEM, EVEN CASUAL CAR ADMIRERS WILL APPRECIATE THE EXHIBITS OF DRIVABLE VEHICLES THAT SEEM TO ECHO THE THRILL OF THE ROAD.

and dashboard signs: Real Buy! Options Galore! Like New! Sporty! Some are displayed with their original dealer price sheets.

“You had lots of different options so you could really personalize one of these cars,” Wellborn says. Here are sporty wheels, hood scoops, vinyl tops, and pinstripes aplenty, but also the first cassette player, from 1971 (it also allowed drivers to use a mike to record their musings or, perhaps, the sound of the police siren behind them) and some of the first sunroofs (their rarity boosts a car’s value).

“All these cars can be driven,” he notes. “They were engineered to last—the Chrysler 426 Hemi and Ford Boss 429 engines were built to race, to go flat-out all afternoon around a NASCAR track.” The most historic, he says, is the 1970 Dodge Charger Daytona in which driver Bobby Isaac won the Grand National Championship and set a record at Talladega—the first lap at over 200 miles per hour. That funny-looking spoiler? It was so effective that NASCAR ultimately banned the design.

You don’t have to be a muscle-car fan to appreciate how the Wellborn museum evokes a free-wheeling time when cars (and regulations) were simpler and the road seemed more open. The collection still holds 23 1971 Dodge Hemi Chargers (his dad’s car), along with other makes. The sale freed up resources and space to show cars



from other collections. “You need new cars to keep a museum interesting,” Wellborn says. He’s happy that Detroit is producing a new generation of muscle cars, like his 2015 Dodge Charger Hellcat. “This is the fastest American stock car ever made—it’ll go 205 miles per hour,” he says, revving the engine. It’s a throwback to the loud, proud age of the classic muscle car—and makes a din that could raise the dead. Behind its wheel, Wellborn beams. As he says, “These are cars that put a smile on your face.”

