1964 Studebaker Super Lark

MT Road Test

by Jim Wright, *Technical Editor*

THIS YEAR, Studebaker is pulling out all stops to make their name as nearly synonymous with speed, performance, and endurance as they can. The reasoning is simple: Today's young drivers have the biggest buying potential the country has ever seen – and these same young buyers just aren't apt to come flocking into a showroom to lay down money for a car that doesn't offer anything more exciting than old-fashioned economy and durability.

Studebaker feels the Commander will be their biggest seller this year, so we ordered one as our test car. We chose a two-door sedan, which is built on a 109-inch wheelbase (all the two-doors are – the four-doors and wagons have 113-inch wheelbases). Since we'd also be testing this car for its performance image potential, we ordered it loaded.

Number one on our personal option list was the complete High-Performance package. It adds $766.70 to the car's base price of $2190 (plus $135 freight), but it's worth every penny. Included are the R-2 Jet Thrust supercharged engine, twin-traction rear axle with radius rods and anti-roll bar for stability (a front anti-roll bar is standard), heavy-duty springs and shock absorbers (Gabriel adjustables at the rear), disc brakes (power assist included), tachometer, 160-mph speedometer, bucket seats, front and rear carpeting, and four-ply tires. We went a step further on the tires and specified Butylaires ($45), mainly because they offer better adhesion under all conditions than do the straight compounds. A four-speed, all-synchro, floor-shift transmission ($189) was also specified, along with a 3.54 rear axle.

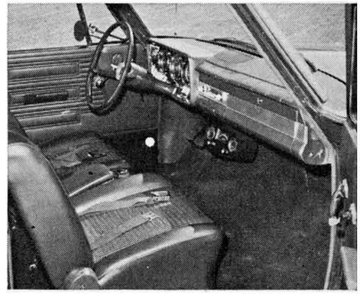
The Halibrand magnesium wheels weren't specified but were included, as was the racing stripe, mainly for photographic purposes. The wheels, in addition to being photogenic, do have some functional advantages. They let the brakes cool more quickly, and because they're lighter, mean a reduction in unsprung weight – slightly improving the ride and handling. At approximately $297.50 a set, they're a good item.

The R-2 engine displaces 289 cubic inches and mounts a Paxton centrifugal supercharger capable of supplying 5½ to 6 pounds of pressure – pumping through a four-barrel carburetor. Studebaker is still a little shy about releasing horsepower figures on any of its hot engines, but we'd guess the output of the R-2 to be at least one horsepower per cubic inch around 4800-5200 rpm.

Our acceleration figures show that in a realistic class, this car could make a good showing at the drags. Set up as it was for the street (3.54 rear axle, street tires, no special tuning), the Commander could consistently turn a 90-mph standing quarter-mile with an elapsed time of 15.8 seconds. The car's 0-60-mph average was a very quick 7.3 seconds. Zero to 30 and 0-45 mph came up in 2.9 and 4.7 seconds. With the proper preparation, this little bomb could easily run in the 108-110-mph bracket, with low-13-second ETs. Several top-speed runs down the Riverside backstretch gave an honest 123 mph, with the tachometer needle showing 5800 rpm (which is pretty close to its 6000-rpm red line). Except for the Corvette, Cobra, and a few others, there just aren't very many cars around capable of pulling to the red line with street rear-axle gears.

You can order the Commander with even more performance by specifying either the supercharged R-3 engine (304.5 cubic inches) or the unblown, dual-quad-carbureted R-4 version (also 304.5 cubic inches). Also available is a wide range of rear-axle gearsets. These run all the way from 2.87 to 4.89.

The Warner four-speed transmission is smooth and quiet, but our linkage was on the sloppy side. During acceleration tests, there were times when it refused to be shifted any way but slowly. All-out, full-throttle power shifts were impossible. From past experience, we'd say that we could've knocked the car's quarter-mile ET down from the re-



(TOP) *A high-performance car like Super Lark should and does have brakes to match its power. Discs up front are unrivaled.*

(RIGHT) *Heavy-duty suspension makes real tiger out of Studebaker around corners.*

(FAR RIGHT) *Interior space gives no hint of the car's smallish, 109-inch wheelbase.*

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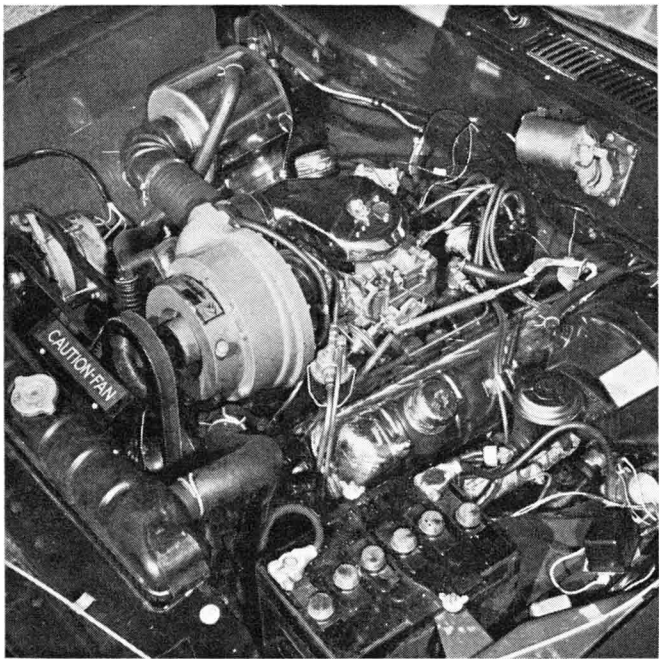

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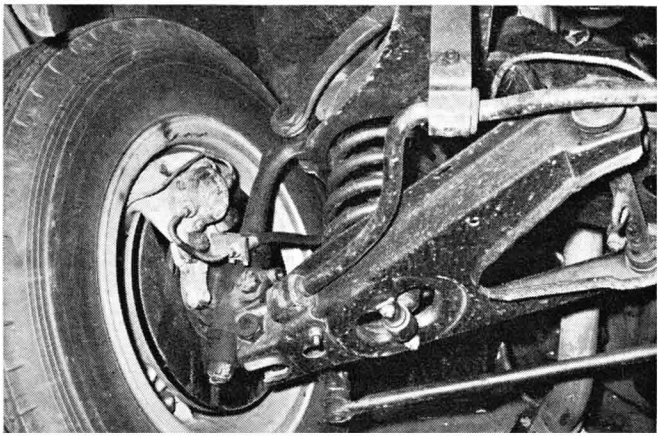

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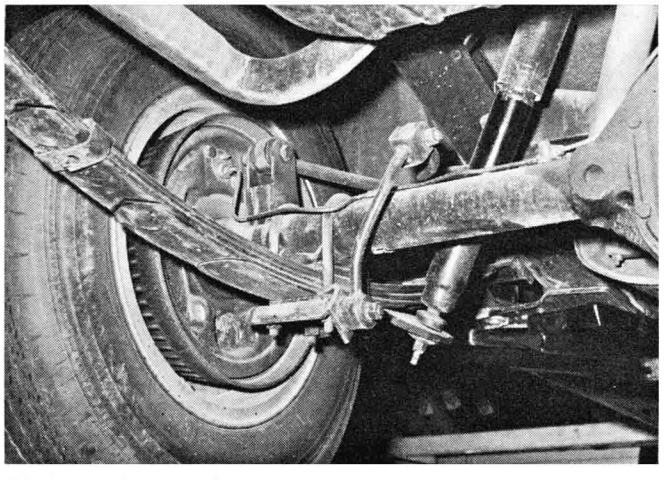

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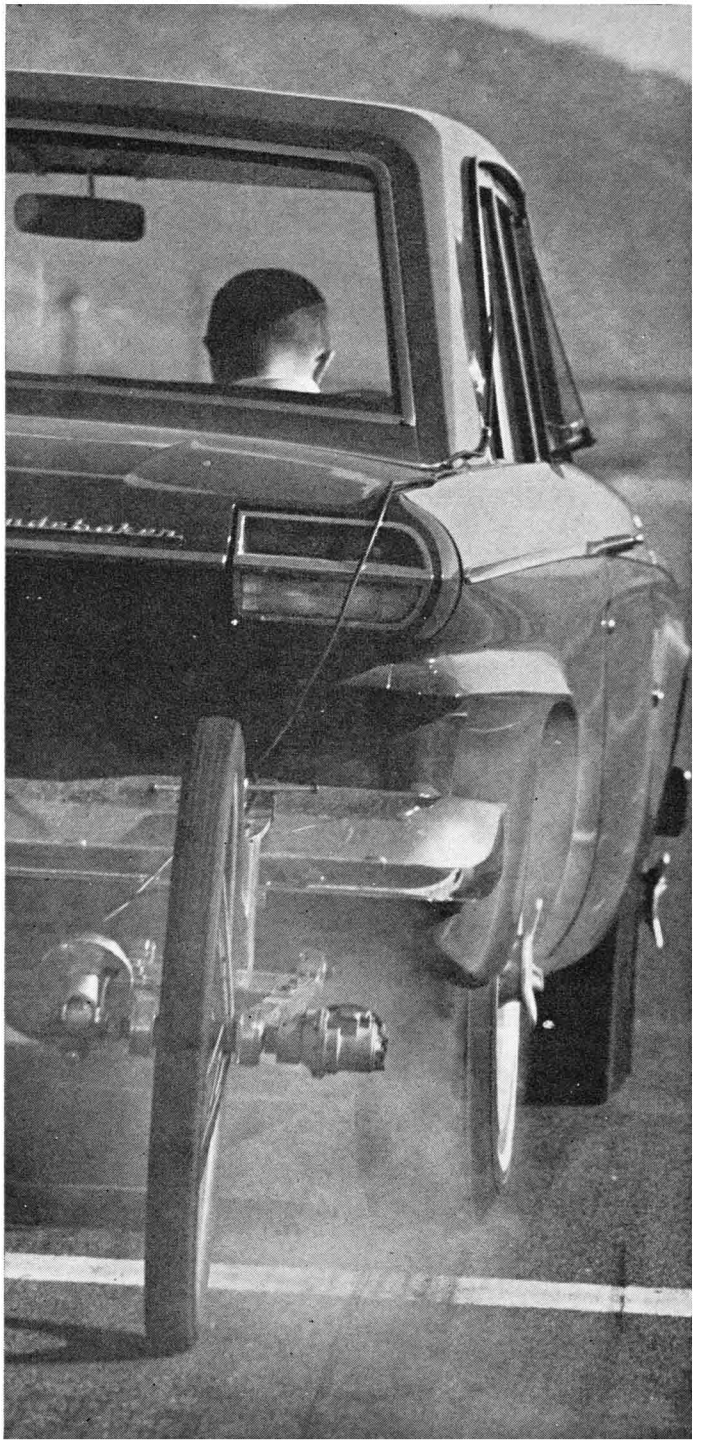

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1) *A lot of other car owners will be in for a surprise when they come up against any mild-looking Larks wearing this emblem.*

2) *Avanti R-2 engine package uses proven Paxton supercharger to pull some mighty healthy horsepower out of the 289-incher.*

3) *Heavy-duty shocks and springs, as well as big disc brakes, are part of high-performance option. Anti-roll bar is stock.*

4) *At rear, optional parts include springs, adjustable shocks, radius rods, and another anti-roll bar for additional stiffness.*

5) *All the above-pictured performance parts add up to give Lark plenty of go off the line. Quarter-mile acceleration runs are equal to many cars with much larger engines which cost much more. Given little help, this could be sleeper at drags.*

corded 15.8 seconds to at most 15 flat if the shift linkage hadn't been so whippy. Standard transmission on this car is a three-speed manual, while a three-speed automatic is optional.

Off-the-line traction was good, with both the Butylaire tires and the heavy-duty suspension contributing. The radius rods effectively controlled any wheel hop during hard acceleration. We had the rear shocks set on FIRM, which is their medium setting. The other two settings are REGULAR and EXPORT.

Fuel consumption was what we'd consider good for a package like this. Our overall average was 13.1 mpg. This figure is based on a total of 1688.5 miles that included all types of driving under all conditions. The around-town average fell in the 10.8-13.2-mpg range, while extended freeway and open-road running (65 to 85 mph) produced 14.4 to 15.8 mpg.

The Skybolt Six is still available for those who want the utmost economy. During the Bonneville record attempts, this engine in a two-door Commander surprised everyone when it set a total of 12 records in the American Class C closed car category. The existing records in this class were set back in 1939 by the late John Cobb at the wheel of a Hudson Six. Top speed set by the Studebaker was the flying one-mile record, with a 102.77-mph average!

The disc front and finned rear drum brakes proved excellent, both in reliability and stopping power. They survived several hard stops from 123 mph without any noticeable fade. During our regular braking tests, all stops were quicker than average, and we made them without a trace of swerve or fade. Studebaker doesn't build in any anti-dive control into the front suspension, so the nose dips more than most of today's cars – but not annoyingly so.

We believe we'd order the heavy-duty suspension parts even on an economy model. They transform what we used to consider a "truck" into a car that's extremely light on its feet, with the handling characteristics of a top-flight sports machine. The only complaint here is that the steering's too slow at 4.7 turns between locks. It really should be

(TOP) *Braking view shows that more-than-average amount of nose dive is present. This doesn't interfere with fast, fade-free, full-control, straight-line stops, though.*

(RIGHT) *All sheet metal has been reworked this year to give Lark a more modern look.*

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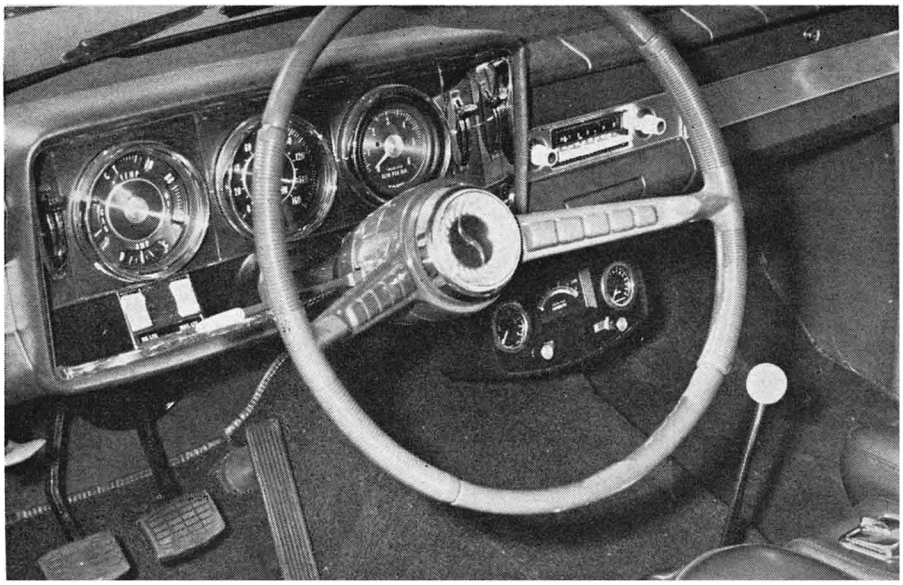

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down around 3.5 turns to do justice to the car's character. At highway speeds or even flat out in the 120- to 125-mph range, the test car was completely stable. In hard, short corners, the front end pushes only slightly, and there's plenty of power on tap to make needed steering corrections. The front and rear anti-roll bars give the added roll stiffness that keeps this car fairly flat in hard corners.

The all-new exterior sheet metal was well fitted, and we couldn't find any large gaps or other signs of sloppy workmanship. The top is about an inch lower than previous models, but there's still enough room inside for a six-footer wearing a hat. For a car with only a 109-inch wheelbase, the Commander offers hip-, shoulder-, and leg room unmatched in the industry.

The Commander offers a padded dash as standard equipment. Also standard is a full line of instruments that tell the driver what's going on under the hood. They're big and easy to read. The test car had a 160-mph speedo and a 6000-rpm tachometer. Both come with the high-performance package. Speedometer error was an acceptable five per cent, but the tach needed recalibration quite badly. We checked it out with our test tach and found it 450 rpm slow at 3000 and 800 rpm slow at 6000.

Our test car was also equipped with an air/fuel ratio meter (called a Carbumeter) that'll soon be marketed by Paxton Products Division of Studebaker. The Carbumeter was flanked on its mounting panel by the blower and fuel pump pressure gauges. The function of the Carbumeter is to let the driver know, at any throttle setting, whether the engine is running too rich or too lean an air/fuel mixture. It does this by analyzing the engine's exhaust. The meter is sensitive enough to detect minute variations in altitude or temperature, both of which have an effect on the air/fuel ratio.

An area of annoyance was the carburetor flooding that came on hard cornering and on maximum deceleration. Carb flooding is a pretty common complaint with most cars in corners, so this isn't too important. The flooding on hard stops (and the engine would die) is inexcusable on a car with power brakes and could set up an extremely dangerous situation.

In the past, Studebaker has always had a good reputation for durability, and we couldn't find anything in the test car's makeup to indicate it wouldn't live up to it. It's a good, honest car and, with the right selection of options, it should more than meet the demands of the enthusiast driver—no matter what age. /MT

STUDEBAKER COMMANDER

2-door, 5-passenger sedan

OPTIONS ON CAR TESTED: High-Performance package (see text), 4-speed transmission, radio, heater, magnesium wheels, Firestone Butylaire tires, seat belts

BASIC PRICE: $2190

PRICE AS TESTED: $3784.10 (plus tax and license)

ODOMETER READING AT START OF TEST: 1601 miles

RECOMMENDED ENGINE RED LINE: 6000 rpm

PERFORMANCE

ACCELERATION (2 aboard)

0-30 mph.....2.9 secs.
0-45 mph.....4.7
0-60 mph.....7.3

Standing start ¼-mile 15.8 secs. and 90 mph

Speeds in gears @ 6000 rpm

1st .....50 mph
2nd .....67 mph
3rd .....83 mph
4th .....123 (actual clocked speed) @ 5800 rpm

Speedometer Error on Test Car

Car's speedometer reading	30	47	52	62	73	84
Weston electric speedometer	30	45	50	60	70	80

Observed miles per hour per 1000 rpm in top gear.....21 mph

Stopping Distances — from 30 mph, 38.5 ft.; from 60 mph, 133.5 ft.

SPECIFICATIONS FROM MANUFACTURER

Engine
Ohv V-8
Bore: 3 9/16 ins.
Stroke: 3⅝ ins.
Displacement: 289 cu. ins.
Compression ratio: 9.0:1
Horsepower: NA
Torque: NA
Horsepower per cubic inch: NA
Carburetion: 1 4-barrel (supercharged)
Ignition: 12-volt coil

Gearbox
4-speed manual, all-synchro; floorshift

Driveshaft
1-piece, open tube

Differential
Hypoid, semi-floating
Standard ratio: 3.54:1

Suspension
Front: Independent coil springs with upper and lower control arms, direct-acting, adjustable tubular shocks, and anti-roll bar
Rear: Rigid axle, with 5-leaf, semi-elliptic springs, radius rods, direct-acting, adjustable tubular shocks, and anti-roll bar

Steering
Recirculating ball
Turning diameter: 37.6 ft.
Turns lock to lock: 4.7

Wheels and Tires
Optional Halibrand magnesium 5-lug wheels
Optional Firestone Butylaire 6.70 x 15 4-ply tires

Brakes
Hydraulic; caliper disc front, drum rear; power assist
Front: 11½-in. dia. grey-iron disc
Rear: 11-in. dia. x 2 ins. wide finned, cast-iron drum
Effective lining area: 105 sq. ins.

Body and Frame
Ladder-type frame with separate body
Wheelbase: 109.0 ins.
Track: front, 57.375 ins.; rear, 56.5625 ins.
Overall length: 190.0 ins.
Curb weight: 3260 lbs. (with full gas tank)

1) Large, easy-to-read instruments are standout features that will be appreciated. Cluster under dash contains both fuel and supercharger pressure gauges, plus a soon-to-be-marketed (by Paxton) air/fuel-ratio meter that tells mixture strength.

2) Trunk area offers enough room for the average family for weekends. Loading is slightly hampered by a high trunk lip.

3) Vigorous cornering failed to show any weaknesses in Super Lark's balance and handling characteristics. Well designed factory suspension modifications offer a great compromise between ride and handling at prices average owners can afford. In fact, the factory price is much cheaper than what it would be for owner to gather parts together on his own — easier, too.

4) With a top speed of 125 mph (or even faster with a different choice of rear-axle gears), the Super Lark has to be counted among the fastest production cars in the country — right up there with the Avanti and some models of the Corvette and Cobra. MT tests at Riverside showed Lark stable all the way.

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