

CAR and DRIVER ROAD TEST

# DODGE CHARGER

Detroit's latest fastback is a neat package of proven components, but the best of the Charger is yet to come!

You've got to admit that "Charger" is a pretty neat name for an automobile. It's gutsy sounding, and best of all, it brings about a refreshing departure from the current Detroit fashion of naming so-called sporting vehicles after various members of *Regna Animalis*.

An occasional wild horse is fine, and maybe even a predatory fish or two, but being aware of the bandwagon instinct that flourishes in the Motor City, we have recurrent nightmares of minor executives by the dozen, poring through zoology texts seeking new car names. Hopefully, those volumes will be closed with the introduction of the Charger.

This new vehicle is the latest Detroit entrant into the burgeoning field of fastbacks. After falling out of style during the 1940s, the sloping roofline began its renaissance with the introduction of the Plymouth Barracuda in 1964. Hard on its heels came the Mustang 2+2 and the Rambler Marlin, and now the Charger. When Chrysler Corporation developed the Barracuda, management gave Dodge Division the option of marketing its own version with different trim work or developing a completely new sports model on the 117-inch Coronet wheelbase. Recalling the thundering failure when Plymouth and Dodge joined to market the near-identical Valiants and Lancers, the Dodge boys chose to develop their own ver-

sion, even though it would mean a one-year delay in getting the automobile on the market.

Dodge had planned to get the Charger into production as a late arrival in the 1965 lineup, but production difficulties delayed its debut until the 1966 model year. This forced Dodge to make a minor adjustment in their promotional strategy, because the entire line of '66s was intended to reflect the "Charger look." Obviously, this was a bit difficult to accomplish as long as the regular models were going to reach the public before the Charger, but the fact remains that there is a strong generic resemblance between the Charger and the entire intermediate-sized Coronet lineup.

Despite the fact that one of the Charger's major styling features is a grille with concealed headlights, the entire frontal treatment has a strong Coronet flavor. This is due primarily to the fact that the same long, narrow rectangle encloses the grillework on both cars, and when the headlights are exposed on the Charger, it looks like a Coronet. The disappearing headlights on the Charger are electrically powered, and operate automatically when the lights are turned on and off. However, they can be left permanently exposed merely by snapping another switch on the Charger instrument panel.

The artistic challenge of placing a streamlined, fastback shape on a wheelbase of 117 inches is not inconsequential and Dodge Chief Stylist William Brownlie and his staff were generally successful in pulling it off. The car looks fine in profile, though it does seem to sit rather high on the suspension. Viewed from a three-quarters front angle, the Charger has a decidedly narrow look about it, but this certainly isn't pronounced enough to offend anyone's sensibilities. There is nothing garish about the Charger; aside from some subdued reliefs in the forward section of the rear fenders, the sides of the car are crisp, simple and tasteful. A cynic recently described the Charger as a "good-looking Marlin," but that isn't a fair appraisal. To be sure, the basic shapes of the two cars are similar, but all of the flashy spaceship styling of the Marlin is lacking in the Charger, and it is to Dodge's everlasting credit that they resisted the temptation to dapple its exterior with the customary chromium frosting.

Our only strong objection to the



styling of the Charger involves the wheel covers. They are an uninspired version of the standard phony wheel discs, complete with phony knock-off hubs. With a new trend toward functional wheels without decoration of any kind, it is a bit disappointing that Dodge is sticking with the same old hokum. It may be that the company will make the custom Cragar wheels available as an option (as with the Dart and Coronet series), and they would make a welcome addition to the line.

The interior provides a rather pleasant environment for four peo-



ple—and no more. Carrying the console to its ultimate conclusion, the right-hand seats are separated from the left by a high ridge that runs the entire length of the passenger compartment like a backbone. This means that accommodations are limited to four persons under all conditions. The rear seat-backs fold down—as with the other Detroit fastbacks—and plenty of utility space is available in the back. We found the headroom in the rear to be adequate for adults, though the seating is not what you would describe as sumptuous. The seat-backs

are too low and too upright and the footroom is too limited for really comfortable travel by a person more than six feet tall. On the positive side, the designers have placed the sloping rear window far enough aft so the rear passengers are adequately protected from the sun. Several of the new fastbacks have such large glass areas over the rear seats that the passengers get the impression that they are traveling in a solarium. Not so with the Charger.

Up front, the instrument panel layout is basically Coronet, though the idiot lights of the regular line



## CHARGER CONTINUED

have given way to a full set of dials, including a tachometer. The panel styling just misses being outstanding, due primarily to a trifle too much chrome. We would have liked the starkly efficient brand of instrumentation found on the Corvette and the 1966 Barracuda Formula S, but you can't have everything.

The seating position is fine and the relationship between the pedals, the steering wheel and the console-mounted shift lever is excellent. Our only complaint involves the optional ersatz wood-rim steering wheel, and the same thing goes for other brands in the industry. With the new sporty wheels has come a tendency to relocate the horn button on the steering wheel hub, where a hand must be removed from the rim to reach it. While *C/D* does not subscribe to the "honk and be damned" school of driving, there are numerous situations where a blast on the

horn can reduce the danger of an accident. Therefore, the horn should be reachable—preferably with the thumbs—without having to steer one-handed. We love the new wood-rim wheels, but let's hope that Detroit sees fit to integrate horn rings into them in the near future.

The Charger is the first vehicle to use a new one-piece headliner made from molded fiberglass. Its surface is a special nylon fabric that is both scratch and soot resistant, while the fiberglass is supposed to provide outstanding temperature and sound insulation.

Naturally you can expect a great deal of noise from Dodge about the "all new" Charger, but the fact remains that it is really a jazzed-up Coronet. In addition to the chassis and wheelbase, the Charger shares the same suspension, powerplants and brakes with its parent car. In fact, its body has practically the

same dimensions as a Coronet two-door hardtop. It is six-tenths of an inch longer than the Coronet (203.6 inches), while both models have an identical girth (75.3 inches).

This similarity is in itself not a bad thing, because the components that have been lifted from the Coronet are in themselves properly, if conventionally, designed. The suspension is standard Chrysler, with torsion bars up front and leaf springs at the rear. The brakes are drums, 10 x 2½ inches, fore and aft. This setup is not particularly great, and look for Dodge to announce disc brakes for the Charger (and the entire Dodge Coronet and Plymouth Belvedere lines as well) about the same time the fabled 426 Hemi is offered as an option, in mid-February.

The basic Charger engine is the old reliable 318 cubic inch V-8, equipped with a two-barrel carburetor and rated at a pallid 230 horse-



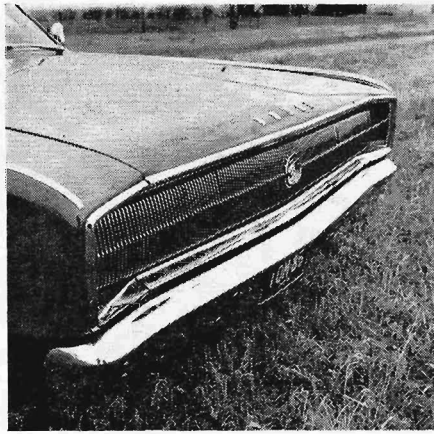
power. Our test car contained the optional 383-cubic inch four-barrel, developing 325 horsepower. The engine was coupled to the outstanding Chrysler Corporation three-speed Torque-Flite automatic transmission, though the Corporation's equally effective four-speed is also available. A manual three-speed is standard equipment on the Charger.

Ignition timing varies slightly between the 383s set up for automatic and manual transmission duty, with the latter having a decidedly fiercer feel. Our test car lacked the potent throb that one comes to expect from the 383 four-barrel set-up. Though the difference in performance is negligible, there is a certain appeal, based on the impression of power, from the unit set up for the manual transmission, and we frankly missed it on our test car.

Because of its strong heritage, it would be a denial of all logic if the Charger didn't feel like a Coronet on the road. Indeed it does feel like a Coronet, and that, we suppose, should not be interpreted as a drawback. The Dodge Coronet is a well-engineered, medium-sized vehicle with a properly located beam rear axle and sensible weight distribution. The Charger is a good automobile, make no mistake about it, but we had somehow expected more when we first got behind the wheel. Maybe it's because the sporty styling conjured up the fantasy of all sorts of exotic engineering underneath. At any rate, we failed to get terribly turned on with the car during our initial tests. It wasn't that we disliked it, it was just the fact that we'd been there before—in an ordinary Coronet.

The Charger runs a true and relatively silent course at 100 mph, with considerably less wind noise than most of the Chrysler line. It corners with grace, if not great style, and it provides a good, workaday balance between powerplant, transmission and suspension. But like we said, why shouldn't it, the Coronet being what it is?

There is no question that any reservations about the Charger based on blandness would have been nonexistent had the test car been equipped with the Hemi. This engine, the very mention of which makes bold men pause to wonder, is maybe the most exciting powerplant to arrive on the American market since the supercharged Duesenberg straight-eight. It is rated at a ludicrously conservative 425 horsepower—primarily to keep the



automotive bleeding hearts from wailing too loudly about safety—and it should transform the Charger into some kind of monster of the automotive midway. We know Dodge plans to market the Hemi with a heavy-duty suspension package and disc brakes, and that should utterly change the identity of the Charger. Like in the movies, you take the horn-rims off the dowdy secretary and she stops combing her hair straight back, and *whammo!* That's what the Hemi will do to the Charger, and we can't wait.

As it is, the car is designed to penetrate the market somewhere in the over-\$3000 category. This means it will be slightly more expensive than the Mustang GT and the Formula S Barracuda, but highly competitive with the Fairlane GT/A, the Chevelle 396 and the Pontiac GTO. In its stock form, the Charger won't have the steam to compete in this league, though the 383 with four-speed, *et al*, should be a contender. But then, we have the Hemi on the horizon, don't we?

The Dodge Charger is basically a performance automobile, and the market in which it will either succeed or fail is that which responds to exaggerated emphasis on raw horsepower and the inherent glamour of speed. Therefore we question the reason for marketing the car

with the 318 or the similarly-tame 361 engines at all. Plymouth initially made the mistake of making the Barracuda emit what the corporation officials liked to call "broad appeal," and was later forced to jazz the car up with the Formula S option. We know the Dodge management is not about to write the Charger off on such a basis, but it is possible that an unerring adherence to the performance line would be the best way to market the car. It might narrow the appeal of the Charger slightly, but the glitter of excitement it would cast on the rest of the Dodge line, from the economy sizes to the plush Polaras, might more than compensate for any loss in sales. With the Chargers expected to bear the burden of Dodge's NASCAR racing fortunes in 1966, the case for stacking the deck in favor of performance becomes even stronger. The Charger will run in NASCAR's "intermediate" class, with a destroyed 405 cu.in. Hemi. Wind-tunnel tests have indicated the car's shape is indeed slippery—there's little question it'll be a contender at Daytona and Charlotte. Performance like this *has* to be exploitable in the showroom.

At any rate, please hurry up with that Hemi. c/o

Specifications overleaf

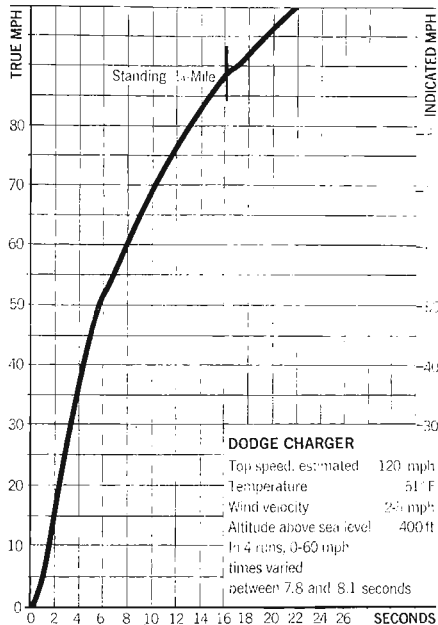
## DODGE CHARGER

Manufacturer: Dodge Division  
Chrysler Corporation  
Detroit 31, Michigan

Price as tested: \$3471.83 FOB Detroit

### ACCELERATION

Zero to	Seconds
30 mph	3.2
40 mph	4.3
50 mph	5.7
60 mph	7.8
70 mph	10.2
80 mph	13.1
90 mph	16.9
100 mph	21.9
Standing 1/4 mile	88 mph in 16.2



### ENGINE

Water-cooled V-8, cast iron block, 5 main bearings  
Bore x stroke 4.25 x 3.38 in, 108.9 x 86.6 mm  
Displacement 383 cu. in, 6277 cc  
Compression ratio 10.0 to one  
Carburetion Single downdraft 4-barrel  
Valve gear Pushrod-operated overhead valves, hydraulic lifters  
Power (SAE) 325 bhp @ 4800 rpm  
Torque 425 lbs-ft @ 2800 rpm  
Specific power output 85 bhp per cu. in, 51.8 bhp per liter  
Usable range of engine speeds 500-5500 rpm  
Electrical system 12-volt, 70 amp-hr battery, 400W alternator  
Fuel recommended Premium  
Mileage 12-16 mpg  
Range on 19-gallon tank 228-304 miles

### DRIVE TRAIN

Transmission 3-speed automatic, plus torque converter

Gear	Ratio	Overall	mph/1000 rpm	Max mph
Rev	2.20	7.11	10.6	58
1st	2.45	7.91	9.5	52
2nd	1.45	4.68	16.1	89
3rd	1.00	3.23	23.3	120
Final drive ratio	3.23 to one			

### CHASSIS

Wheelbase 117.0 in  
Track F 59.5 R 58.5 in  
Length 203.6 in  
Width 75.3 in  
Height 54.3 in  
Ground Clearance 5.8 in  
Curb Weight 3650 lbs  
Test Weight 3840 lbs  
Weight distribution front/rear 51/49%  
Pounds per bhp (test weight) 11.81  
Suspension F: Ind., unequal-length wishbones, torsion bars, stabilizer bar  
R: Beam axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs  
Brakes 10-in drums front and rear, 340.2 sq in swept area  
Steering Rack and sector  
Turns, lock to lock 3.5  
Turning circle 40.9 ft  
Tires and wheels 7.35-14 on 5.5-in rim

### CHECK LIST

#### ENGINE

Starting Good  
Response Good  
Noise Good  
Vibration Good

#### DRIVE TRAIN

Clutch action —  
Transmission linkage —  
Synchromesh action —  
Power-to-ground transmission Fair

#### BRAKES

Response Good  
Pedal pressure Good  
Fade resistance Fair  
Smoothness Very Good  
Directional stability Good

#### STEERING

Response Good  
Accuracy Very Good  
Feedback Good  
Road feel Fair

#### SUSPENSION

Harshness control Very Good  
Roll stiffness Good  
Tracking Good  
Pitch control Good  
Shock damping Very Good

#### CONTROLS

Location Good  
Relationship Very Good  
Small controls Good

#### INTERIOR

Visibility Good  
Instrumentation Good  
Lighting Good  
Entry/exit Very Good  
Front seating comfort Good  
Front seating room Good  
Rear seating comfort Fair  
Rear seating room Fair  
Storage space Excellent  
Wind noise Good  
Road noise Good

#### WEATHER PROTECTION

Heater Very Good  
Defroster Good  
Ventilation Good  
Weather sealing Fair  
Windshield wiper action Good

#### QUALITY CONTROL

Materials, exterior Good  
Materials, interior Good  
Exterior finish Good  
Interior finish Good  
Hardware and trim Fair

#### GENERAL

Service accessibility Fair  
Luggage space Very Good  
Bumper protection Fair  
Exterior lighting Good  
Resistance to crosswinds Good

