

AN AGILE COMPACT THAT LIVES UP TO ITS NAME

# DART GT ROAD TEST



ONCE IN A WHILE, almost by accident it seems, a car comes along that is really pleasant to drive. Even in the touted sports car ranks, there are few of the really expensive handmades capable of producing that intangible mechanical/human rapport of sheer motoring pleasure. The high-priced thoroughbred is nimble as a cat, but driver comfort is a dirty word. Most production family cars ride nice, but handle like a rock. The Dodge Dart GT falls somewhere in between these two extremes.

During the four years of its production, we've known the compact Dart in just about every kind of trim: stock, drag strip, road race, rally. The Dart GT is a very good all-around car. It falls short of our ideal in some respects, is superior in others.

As with the body styling, engineering changes and refinements to the power train and chassis/suspension have been

subtle. It is within this framework of engineering reference that the Dart solicits the greatest praise, and sharpest criticism.

Perhaps our most severe complaint about the Dart (GT or otherwise) is the extremely sensitive power steering — especially for someone unfamiliar with the typically light “one-finger” feel of Chrysler-assisted steering. We've been in some mighty uncomfortable situations caused by this hair-trigger control.

The manual steering is quite sufficient for the Dart series, since the total vehicle weight is only 2600-2900 pounds (1600-1700 pounds on the front end, depending on the engine), but is uncomfortably slow (5.3 turns lock-to-lock) for heavy traffic conditions. We prefer the faster (3.5) power option, but hasten to advise a special driving technique for it. Until you become very familiar with the power steering, you may want to hold the wheel at both sides or at the bottom. This will help cut down on over-control tendencies.

Very popular with women drivers (especially the GT hardtop), the Dart owes much to a pronounced agility. The short overall length — just under 16

feet — makes it an honest compact. Couple this size and relative light weight to a torsion-bar front suspension, and you have an exciting combination.

For driving through the twisting mountain roads of the West and the narrow highways of the East, the Dart is an exceptionally responsive car. It goes directly where you point it. At anything over 40 mph, both manual and power steering produce slight understeer. Again, however, be careful of the power steering. Blend in steering-wheel pressure lightly, otherwise you'll take the corner in a series of embarrassing jerks.

The torsion bars are relatively “soft,” consequently there is definite body roll in cornering. This is a smooth transition, though, and with experience we have found we can twist the car around a road-racing circuit with consistently low lap times. Because the suspension is uniform in behavior, the car will take an immediate “set” driving into a turn and stay there throughout the maneuver. Not so with most family autos.

For the Dart owner who does much sustained high-speed or mountain-road driving, we definitely recommend the optional 14-inch wheels. Those little 13-



Compact Dart's styling has been changed only slightly in four years. 1966 changes are primarily in tail/head lights, grille.



Vinyl top insert of the GT is held by chrome trim which causes a strong, irritating wind noise at moderate to high road speeds.



inch stock dandies are great for running around to the local supermarkets, but they're just plain insufficient for continued hard cornering. They'll roll under severely, even during normal cornering, sometimes causing abnormally fast tire wear. Incidentally, many enthusiasts increase the wheel-rim width by one to two inches (both 13- and 14-inch wheels have a 4.5-inch rim span) to further help the handling.

In the brake department, the rating would be "sufficient for average use." Listed as an option, however, is a disc-brake setup for the front wheels that makes stopping a pleasantly reassuring surprise. This \$81.36 special package is worth every cent, but by all means order the discs *with* power assist.

We've done a number of panic brake tests with the Dart (all four wheels locked up from 60 mph), and directional control is excellent as long as you don't over-control by whipping the steering wheel suddenly. However, beware of rear-end hop. As with most production cars, only 40% of the total

car weight is on the rear wheels. Under hard deceleration, much of the Dart's approximately 1000 rear-end pounds shifts forward and the tires will break loose into a chatter.

Few squeaks and rattles showed up in the body, even after many miles over rough roads, but the hardtops and convertibles have an annoying habit of door/quarter-window misalignment. The quarter windows must be carefully adjusted to fit tightly against the door windows, otherwise the latter are free to vibrate.

As far as road noise is concerned, the chrome trim around the front edge of the vinyl top covering on the hardtops sets up a strong wind noise over 35 mph, noticeably lacking in smooth-top models. Head winds offer very definite resistance, but side or tail winds have little effect. Ventilation is direct and good during open-road driving, but lordy, don't ever open those little box doors in heavy traffic. You might just as well sit down with your nose in an exhaust pipe.

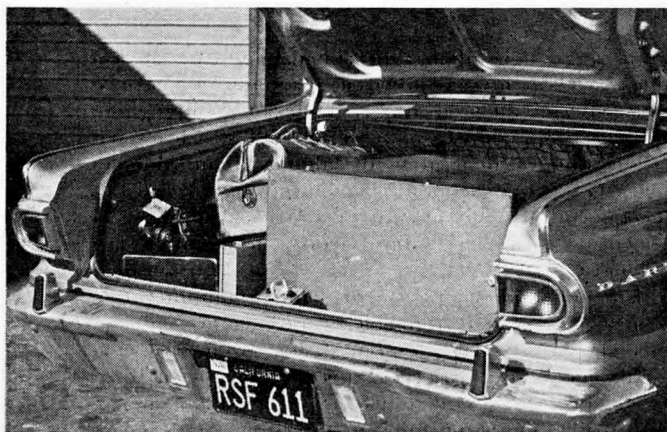
The bucket seats in the GT series (all

series, for that matter) are quite comfortable IF — if the seat back is tilted forward. The amount of adjustment is an individual matter, but we've found about a 1-inch elevation at the rear of the seat frame rails suitable for most drivers.

On the subject of power, the GT comes standard with the 273-cubic-inch V-8 which produces 180 hp with a 2-barrel carburetor and 235 hp with the 4-barrel carb. Frankly, there is little difference in gasoline mileage between the two packages, as long as wide-open throttle settings are avoided. The 273 engine is a snappy powerplant, with just enough reserve at higher cruising speeds for normal passing acceleration. It's no 425-cubic-inch street hemi, though, so don't expect it to dislocate a vertebra when you get the urge to go quick.

Like we said, the Dart GT is one of those rare cars that add a certain pleasure to driving, and that's really saying something for a machine basically designed as a compact family vehicle.

—LeRoi Smith



Trunk compartment is much larger than at first glance, can take bulky items like a file cabinet. Trunk insulation is inadequate.



In keeping with austere compact car theme, instrument panel is plain. Bucket seats should be tilted up at rear for comfort.

PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

## DODGE DART GT

2-door, 5-passenger sport coupe

### SPECIFICATIONS FROM MANUFACTURER

**ENGINE IN TEST CAR:** Ohv V-8  
Bore and stroke: 3.63 x 3.31 ins.  
Displacement: 273 cu. ins.  
Advertised horsepower: 180 @ 4200 rpm  
Max. torque: 250 lbs.-ft. @ 1600 rpm  
Compression ratio: 8.8:1  
Carburetion: 1 2-bbl.

**TRANSMISSION TYPE & FINAL DRIVE RATIO:** Torque-Flite Eight, automatic, torque converter with automatically operated planetary gear transmission. 2.93:1 rear-axle ratio

**SUSPENSION:** Independent front with non-parallel control arms and torsion bars. Parallel leaf springs at rear on 1-piece case. Direct-acting tubular shocks at each wheel

**STEERING:** Rack and sector, with integral power assist  
Turning diameter: 38.6 ft., curb to curb  
Turns lock to lock: 3.5

**WHEELS:** Steel disc, 13-in. dia., standard; 14-in. optional

**TIRES:** 7.00 x 13 4-ply-rated rayon standard; 6.95 x 14 optional

**BRAKES:** Hydraulic duo-servo; self-adjusting  
Diameter of drum: front, 10 ins.; rear, 10 ins.

**SERVICE:**  
Type of fuel recommended: Premium  
Fuel capacity: 18 gals.  
Oil capacity: 4 qts.; with filter, 5 qts.  
Shortest lubrication interval: 4000 mi.  
Oil- and filter-change interval: 4000 mi.

**BODY & FRAME:** Unitized 1-piece construction  
Wheelbase: 111.0 ins.  
Track: front, 55.9 ins.; rear, 55.6 ins.  
Overall length, 196.3 ins.; width, 70.8 ins.; height, 53.1 ins.  
Min. ground clearance: NA  
Usable trunk capacity: 17.3 cu. ft.  
Curb weight: 3060 lbs.

### PERFORMANCE

**ACCELERATION (2 aboard)**  
0-30 mph ..... 3.6 secs.  
0-50 mph ..... 8.2 secs.  
0-60 mph ..... 12.5 secs.  
0-75 mph ..... 18.1 secs.

**TIME & DISTANCE TO ATTAIN PASSING SPEEDS**  
40-60 mph ..... 6.1 secs., 446 ft.  
50-70 mph ..... 7.8 secs., 686 ft.

**STANDING-START QUARTER-MILE:** 18 secs. and 74 mph

**BEST SPEEDS IN GEARS @ SHIFT POINTS**  
1st ..... 26 mph @ 4100 rpm  
2nd ..... 70 mph @ 4100 rpm  
3rd ..... 86 mph @ 3700 rpm

**MPH PER 1000 RPM:** 25  
**SPEEDOMETER ERROR AT 60 MPH:** 12% slow  
**STOPPING DISTANCES:** from 30 mph, 43 ft.; from 60 mph, 133 ft.

### ACCESSORY PRICE LIST

Engine options: 145 hp (6-cyl.) ..... \$ 46.00  
to 235 hp (V-8) ..... 96.57  
\*Automatic transmission (for V-8) ..... 175.86

4-speed transmission (V-8 only) ..... 174.13  
Overdrive ..... —  
Limited-slip differential ..... 37.33  
Heavy-duty suspension (incl. 6.95 x 14 Blue Streak tires) ..... 67.37  
\*Whitewall tires (6.95 x 14) ..... 31.88  
Disc brakes (incl. Blue streak tires) ..... 81.36  
\*Power brakes ..... 41.45  
\*Power steering ..... 79.75  
Power windows ..... —  
Power seat ..... —  
\*Radio AM ..... 56.94  
Radio AM/FM ..... —  
Air conditioning (not avail. with std 170 6-cyl.) ..... 316.20  
\*Tinted glass ..... 27.70  
\*Bucket seats ..... std  
Adjustable steering wheel ..... —  
Clock ..... —  
Tachometer ..... —  
Automatic headlight dimmer ..... —  
Automatic speed regulator ..... —  
\*Vinyl roof cover ..... 48.35  
Head rests ..... —  
\*On test car  
Dash (—) — not offered  
NA — Information not available at presstime

MANUFACTURER'S SUGGESTED LIST PRICE: \$2400 (incl. taxes, safety equip't & PCV device)

PRICE OF CAR TESTED: \$3237.50 (incl. excise tax, delivery & get-ready charges, but not local tax & license)

MANUFACTURER'S WARRANTY: 50,000 miles and/or 5 years