

THE BEST CARS OF 1969



PHOTO BY GORDON CHITTENDEN

It wasn't all roses, however. We didn't like the power steering—too much boost, too little effort, too little feel, and too slow a ratio. We would have preferred (a) a much faster ratio, with its attendant increase in effort, or even (b) a completely manual system that might just work with the light engine/light car combination.

The interior of the Swinger betrayed its budget heritage with rubber floor mats, plain bench seats, and a spartan instrument display. After sampling the performance of the car, we would have liked real bucket seats, plush appointments and a dash panel full of instruments.

To us the current crop of compacts offer little of what they are supposed to, anyway. They are not small, they are not economical and they are not very much fun to drive. The Swinger has performance and is fun to drive—a lot more performance and fun than some of the intended performance and fun cars.

Best Compact DART SWINGER 340

BEST COMPACT, as applied to the Dodge Dart Swinger 340, is like hanging a *Good Eats* sign outside Maxim's. We discovered the '69 version as part of a group test on budget Supercars (see "Explosion in Budget Supercars, Jan., page 47). We were already hooked by the 340-cid V-8—we'd tried it in a number of more expensive Chrysler products, including the 'Cuda 340 tested earlier in the model year. But when Dodge packaged the 340 engine in a budget Dart wrapping, the car became one of the most significant we tested during the year.

Here was a compact, pure and simple, with few accessories to run the cost up or the power down. It had a strong mid-range engine and a handling package that didn't cost anything over and above the base price.

Extras on our test car were front power disc and one of the better automatic transmissions going (only \$29.35 extra). Suddenly we had a Supercar that could crank off consistent under-15-sec. quarter-miles, handle with the best sports cars, yet the engine and transmission were docile, and the ride soft enough, so that the missus would never suspect. How could the car that she uses to haul the cub scouts around ever wind up at the strip on grudge night? She may suspect a Wednesday night mistress, but she would never guess that that mistress resides in the garage.

Even we seasoned car testers were affected by this family car illusion. We tested the Swinger right alongside a "prepped" Road Runner and a Ford Fairlane Cobra. Both had great thundering engines, manhandling

four-speeds and huge tires to make all that weight and power behave itself. Match racing down the strip, the 'Runner or Cobra driver would have to work hard to keep the torque under control, the car pointed straight and the transmission shifted. Meanwhile the Swinger driver simply stood on it and steered. No excitement, no drama, and seemingly not much fun. It would be a dead heat nearly every time. After a few test runs, the big-iron drivers would get out of their cars glassy-eyed. They had taken on a big torque producing monster and mastered it. They had been racing. The Swinger driver yawned a lot. It was so bad, in fact, that one tester suggested that maybe we shouldn't call the Swinger a Supercar. It didn't *act* like one, no belt in the back, no bellow and roar, no uncontrollable

torque. All right, said the small car proponent, so it isn't a Supercar, it's just faster than one.

The Swinger's secret was optimum power. Just what the chassis was capable of handling and no more. The 340 is another of those "naturals" like the small block Chevy (which it closely resembles) that breathes and revs well. Most of its power is spread over the upper rpm ranges. This keeps traction-busting torque from overpowering the chassis and blowing a drag run, or landing the driver in trouble in a curve.

And in the curves the Swinger is no slouch either. Chrysler Corp. is one of the few manufacturers that is not completely bound up in the understeer-is-safe-therefore-a-lot-of-understeer-is-safer philosophy. Plymouth and Dodge Supercars understeer, which is good. It's just that they don't understeer as much. For normal driving the Swinger understeers. Extend it on a mountain road, and you'll quickly notice that the car is very willing to negotiate a turn, no matter how tight. It has no terminal understeer, because as the limit is approached, it becomes more neutral. Over the limit it can be "saved" by inducing throttle oversteer.

SPECIFICATIONS

Wheelbase, in.....	111	Brakes: Disc front/drum rear, proportioning valve.	
Overall length, in.....	195.4	dia. x width, F/R.....	10.79 x 1.84/10.0 x 1.75
width.....	69.6	total swept area, sq. in.....	314.7
height.....	54.4	Engine: V-8	
No. of passengers.....	6	Bore x stroke, in.....	4.04 x 3.31
Price, basic.....	\$2857	Displacement, cu. in.....	340
as tested.....	\$3470	Compression ratio.....	10.5:1
Frame type: Unitized		Rated bhp @ rpm.....	275 @ 5000
Front suspension: Independent by s.l.a., torsion bars, telescopic shock absorbers.		Transmission: Three-speed automatic with torque converter.	
Rear suspension: Hotchkiss live axle, multileaf springs, telescopic shock absorbers.		Gear ratio 3rd (1.00:1).....	3.23:1
Steering: Integral assist, recirculating ball gear, parallelogram linkage behind front wheels.		2nd (1.45:1).....	4.69:1
overall ratio.....	18.8:1	1st (2.45:1).....	7.91:1
turns, lock to lock.....	3.5	Lb./bhp (test weight).....	13.1
turning circle, ft. curb-curb.....	37.8	Mph/1000 rpm (high gear).....	22.3
Curb weight.....	3310	Engine revs/mile (60 mph).....	2690
Tires: Goodyear Polyglas.....	D70-14	Piston travel, ft./mile.....	1814
		CAR LIFE Wear Index.....	48.7

ROAD TEST RESULTS

Speedometer reading @ 30 mph.....	27.6	Passing, 30-70 mph, sec.....	5.4
Speedometer reading @ 60 mph.....	58.6	Braking: Maximum deceleration rate	
Top Speed (5400).....	121	ft./sec./sec.....	22
Acceleration 0-30 mph, sec.....	3.0	No. of stops from 80 mph (at 60-sec. intervals) before 20% loss in deceleration rate.....	5
0-40 mph.....	4.2	Control loss: Moderate.	
0-50 mph.....	5.4	performance.....	fair
0-60 mph.....	6.9	Fuel consumption under test conditions,	
0-70 mph.....	8.4	mpg.....	11
0-80 mph.....	10.5	Normal cond., mpg.....	12-15
Standing ¼ mile, sec.....	14.8		
Speed at end, mph.....	96		