

The 340 mill is plenty powerful for dragstrip bashing, yet won't drive you out of your mind at the gas station or insurance office.

ALL TOGETHER

While almost everything else 'performancewise' is going downhill this year, Dodge has concocted a super-handling sleeper in the 340 Challenger, '71 edition

BY JOE OLDHAM



The new Mopar 340-incher is one of the best engineered engines in the Chrysler camp.

IF YOU HAVEN'T BEEN reading your car magazines lately, you've probably missed all the new car coverage that graces the pages of all the automotive publications every fall. Your 50, 60 or 75 cents gets you cover to cover advertising.

On top of this display of automotive adjectives, the manufacturers themselves have their ad agencies stuff even more biased pieces of literary genius into every available

untaken space between front and back covers.

We're sure that if you look closely through the fall issues, you'll even find touts for the new cars under the binding staples. It's even possible that all this could be worthwhile if there were anything really new to yell about. The sad fact is that there isn't.

We all know that '71 is the year of the low compression ratio and of less performance. In spite of this, we

were amazed at the reports we read by almost all of the automotive journalists who tried to out-describe each other's descriptions of the army gas-type '71 muscle cars. Along with the phoney type and raves, we were treated to arty photos of the new sheetmetal—the Riviera's ugly roofline, Javelin's new front fender bulges and Camaro's grille, the glued-on look of the Charger's vinyl roof and the trick tailgate on the GM full size wagons.

There were a few highlights, but they were limited to the Mustang fast-back and some of the Mopar intermediates. The GM ponycars were leftover '70½'s and the Gremlin-Vega-Pinto types offer nothing to the hard-core supercar freak.

We were hoping for some really dynamite offerings in this period of



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stagnation, recession, and Nader-induced brainfade and found none.

There may be a ray of hope in this myriad of maladies. A few guys in Detroit have not yet been affected by the grimness of the situation and may really be with it after all. Money is tight, horsepower is down, insurance premiums are out of sight. So where do the product planners aim? How about a little lower, where the initial purchase price isn't as high, brute horsepower is not quite as important and insurance rates not quite so exorbitant. How about something for the enthusiast but not quite the purist?

The purpose of all this rhetoric is to call attention to the obvious. You see, we've described a 1970 car that kind of got lost in the shuffle last year when the whole picture wasn't quite as bleak. We've described a car that, this year, stands out as a really desirable automobile. Plus it's been refined this year so that it's even more desirable. What we've been talking about all along is the *1970 Challenger—'71 edition*.

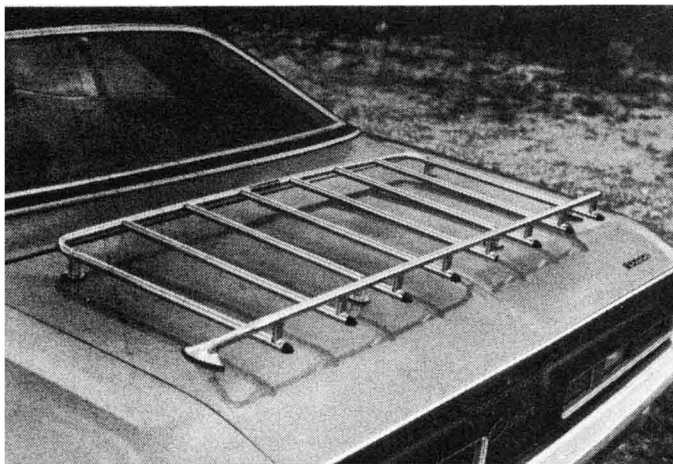
The minor changes in the grille and tail lights go almost unnoticed. In fact, it may be hard to convince some people that you didn't just repaint your old Challenger when you show up in a '71.

But this is where all similarities end. Dodge has made noticeable changes to the engine and the suspension—so noticeable that we could tell it was a different car with the first few revolutions of the odometer. Actually, the only way we can describe the '71 Challenger is to use that slightly used up but applicable cliché: Dodge has got it *all* together.

Our test car was a Challenger R/T hardtop. The base engine in the '71 R/T is the small block wedge 340. The compression cuts in the Chrysler camp have affected only their baseline engines. All the performance goodies got away unscathed, including the 340. Our 340 was still the same smooth 275 rated horsepower (NHRA factors it to 310) that has been available for the past couple of years.

A few changes which could have affected horsepower output seem to have cancelled each other out. The major change is the addition of a Carter Thermo-Quad four-barrel in place of the Carter AVS. It's a version made specifically for this application and is not the super high-flow 850 or 1050-cfm models you are

Top, Dodge's engine/suspension mods were quite noticeable. Center, the TorqueFlite-equipped test car had the new part-throttle kickdown feature. E60-15 Goodyears handle the roundy-round action quite well. Bottom, Chrome wheels and new rear lights enhanced the gray Mopar.



Luggage rack is a '71 option and super-critic Oldham likes these options that show some consumer consideration.



E60-15 Polyglas skins are eight inches across; they excel in the traction department when mounted on seven-inch Rally wheels.

familiar with. This power increase is unfortunately countered with the addition of a more effective heat riser valve housed in the 318 exhaust manifolds which are standard equipment for '71 340's. The engine pipes that follow the manifold are also from the 318 Challenger but terminate after running for about two feet. There, they are welded into the standard 340 dual exhaust system.

This restriction is a definite disadvantage and just about cancels out all the benefits of the Thermo-Quad.

Our TorqueFlite equipped test car had the new part throttle kickdown feature. In conjunction with the improved response from the small primaries in the four-barrel carb, this new feature makes around town driving much easier with the small-block Mopar wedge and a little more economical. Before, the trans always seemed to be in the wrong gear because of the lack of low end torque.

The shifter mechanism was the familiar slap-stick now with a tougher T-handle grip. This ratchet shift mechanism has got to be the best auto trans control in terms of positive range selection since the dial-a-win push-button setup on the old Mopar super/stocks.

Our test car was supplied by Rockville Center Dodge in Rockville Centre, New York. General Manager Abe Cirlin keeps a few of the hotter models around as demonstrators so his supercar customers can sample a little more than the standard advertising pamphlets before plunking down their bucks and signing the order form.

The Challenger R/T was Gunmetal Gray and had about every popular option except power windows and a sunroof. The R/T had a little

less than a thousand miles on the clock when we picked it up. The 60 mile drive from Rockville Centre to Suffolk County Raceway was extremely pleasant. The car is actually pretty luxurious and we could have been riding in a more expensive luxury load were it not for the exhaust blast when we ripped up through the gears.

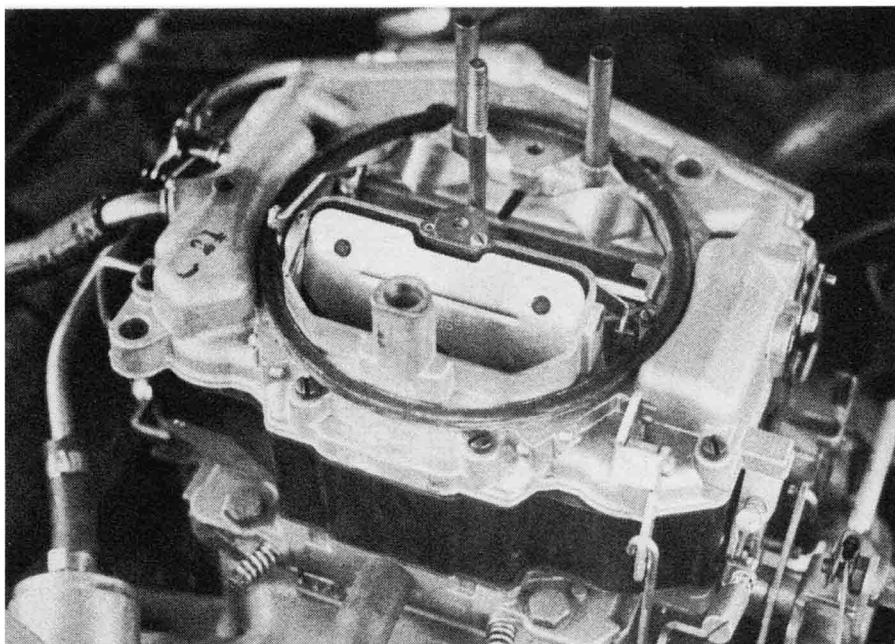
What little noise the E60-15 Goodyears made was drowned out by the five speakers of the AM-FM Multiplex unit. This baby really puts out sound, Jim.

Also making with the sounds was a new option—a cassette recorder. With the multimillion dollar stereo tape market at its peak, Chrysler came out with a unit of its own. Our test car had it. It's not the Lear 8-

track unit that was available as a dealer installed option in '70. Instead, it was a cassette-type in a separate unit, mounted in the console. The cassette player will also record through a microphone or directly off the car radio. It's available with the AM radio for the AM-FM Multiplex option and it plays through the three front speakers and the optional dual rear speakers.

We had great fun taping oldies and then having our own rock and roll revival right in the test car. With the 6-way adjustable bucket seat in the rearward rake position, we could assume a comfortable arms-out driving position. At less than thirty bucks for this adjustment option, it's hard to go wrong by ordering it.

Every suspension option in the

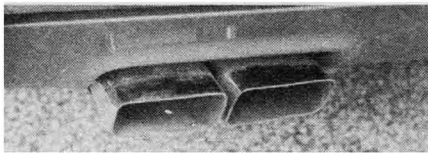


A super Carter Thermo-Quad replaces last year's Carter AVS pot; '71 perf is much improved.

book was ordered on our test car. The already firm ride was goosed up by stiffer shocks all around and sway bars front and rear. The rear bar was supposed to be an option last year but only the factory knew about it and it was impossible to get one. The rear bar on our car was like the icing on the cake. Challengers handle fairly good even in stock form. With the heavy-duty suspension option, they handle very good. With the rear sway bar installed, handling climbs into the out of sight category.

The eight-inch wide Goodyear Polyglas GT tires on seven-inch wide Rally wheels did their bit in the handling department, too. And it was some bit. The combination of the suspension plus those tires made for handling, *unknown* in Detroit until last year.

The chrome wheels and the luggage



Quad exhaust pipes are a styling exercise, so it's up to you for the "like/not like" scene.

rack option set the car off in a silver-black-chrome motif which, added to the black tail lamp housings and black grille, is distinctly different from the '70 model.

Once out at Suffolk Raceway, the Challenger was really reamed out. We ran it through the quarter-mile under the supervision of Dennis Ferrara and Pete Halsworth. With the Polyglas tires pumped up to 38 psi all around and the air cleaner removed, we ran times between 14.55 and 14.88 with all runs right around

94-96 mph. Our absolute best ET was a 14.55 and on a different run we recorded our best trap speed—96.89 mph. This was with a Sure-Grip 3.55 rear axle.

Naturally, this was on a low mileage engine and into a strong Westhampton headwind. As a matter of fact, some light snow was blowing around which dampened the track and made traction very poor.

With the air conditioning on, the car still ran a 15 second quarter with one mph less trap speed.

After waiting out the snow flurries, we moved down to the handling course. Westhampton's handling course is an oval with an infield road course. It's a very tight course with a few nice sweeping lefthanders and some tight corners in either direction off the long straights. You can really test high speed maneuverability on a course like this. We went to it.

As we expected, the Challenger leaned only slightly even in the tightest, fastest, hairiest bends thanks to the stiff springs and sway bars front and rear. The steering was a little too light as it is with all Mopar power assisted setups. But directional control was good and steering was just about neutral.

Like most Detroit ponycars with heavy-duty suspensions and V-8 engines, the Challenger R/T starts off with mild understeer that is easily controlled. The more throttle you use and the more speed you build up through turns, the more neutral handling becomes. You finally reach the point of power oversteer as the limit of adhesion of the rear tires is crossed and the rear end slides out on you. If you back off the throttle, it tucks back in. Which is to say that the whole thing is very gentle and very controlled. The Challenger is a safe handling car that won't be throwing even a novice driver any tricky situations.

Frankly, the Challenger is the best handling Mopar ponycar we have ever driven. And we've driven all of them. The tires and rear bar make the difference.

Actually, we liked driving the '71 Challenger very much even though a lot of people thought it was only a '70. It could be that Dodge has been influenced just a little by Volkswagen thinking which dictates that you don't change the body every year but only make detail improvements under the skin. We hope so, but we doubt it. But even if the influence only lasts a year or two, it can't be bad. VW is selling an awful lot of Beetles these days.

