

America's Difference-Makers

If somebody out there has a GT40 and a Daytona Coupe in the same garage, please, let me live there. I promise to take good care of your cars

To celebrate SCM's 20th birthday, I hereby offer my take on a Top 20 list. The criteria were simple: I didn't focus on a particular era or type of car. I just picked cars I would like to see in my garage. That can be because they are historically significant, or really fast, or particularly pleasing to look at. No rhyme or reason; the common theme is they are cars I admire.

As you will see, similar cars or various years of the same models have been lumped together in some cases. Within each of these categories, there could be multiple cars I like, or cars so similar that others may like one or the other. For example, Ford Mustangs—this includes K Codes, Boss 302 and 429s, etc. This is a “pick your poison” grouping.

If you think I'm nuts, you're probably right—but then all of us in this hobby are a little (or more than a little) nuts, don't you agree?

1 1964 Shelby Cobra Daytona Coupe

Price range: \$10 million–\$15 million
Number made: 6

Cobra roadsters are the aerodynamic equivalent of the broad side of a barn. Peter Brock fixed that with his coupe body designed to get the Cobra to 180-plus mph. It worked, and the coupe won the World Manufacturer's Championship for Shelby. They only built six. 'Nuff said.



1967 GT40 Mk III

2 1962–1965 Shelby 260/289 Cobra

Price range: \$550,000–\$2.5 million
Number made: 592, including street/comp/prototypes

Ridiculously crude and unrefined result of Carroll Shelby shoving a Ford V8 in the antiquated AC Ace chassis. He used the car to let the sports car world know he was kicking ass and taking names. “Entry level” is a 260-ci worm-and-sector-steering street car; upper end are factory-backed Comp cars. I'm biased, but few cars have ever captured the magic or delivered more than Shelby's original creation. If you can only have one collector car, get one of these.

3 1965–1967 Shelby 427 Cobra

Price range: \$600,000–\$2.5 million
Number made: 312, including street/comp/prototypes

The lithe little 289 Cobra was now a fire-breathing, big-block muscle car of sorts. A new coil-spring chassis helped handle the power, although the 427 never captured the charm (or race record) of the small-block cars. Far lower production numbers than the 289 and lots more street

cred. If you're going to be a bear, be a grizzly, right? Nobody will ever ask you, “Couldn't you have gotten something a little faster?”

4 1965 Shelby GT350 / GT350 R

Price range: \$200,000–\$1 million
Number made: 562, including street/drag/prototypes and 34 Competition (R)

The car that was so damn good it changed how people looked at Mustangs (and Shelby) forever. R models are the top dog, nearly unbeatable in competition and a precious commodity today. Even the street cars are raw and elemental. Shelby built Mustangs through 1970, but none as focused as the original. A 250 SWB for 10% of the price, and NAPA has a complete tune-up kit for fifty bucks.

5 1965–1967 Ford GT40 Mk I, II, III, and J Cars

Price range: \$2 million–\$15 million
Number made: About 106, depending on who you ask

The Ford that beat Ferrari 1-2-3 at Le Mans in 1966, regardless of what order they were told to cross the line. Another Herculean

feat pulled off by an underdog, this time thanks to the vengeful Henry “The Deuce” Ford II and his bottomless pockets. If somebody out there has a GT40 and a Daytona Coupe in the same garage, please, let me live there. I promise to take good care of your cars.

6 1932 Ford V8

Price range: \$10,000 to huge money for historic period-built hot rods
Number made: Far more than Ford ever built

Undeterred by one of the worst economic times in history, in 1932 Ford introduced an affordable V8 car for the masses. The new 221-ci flathead made 65 hp and could reach nearly 80 mph. Post-WWII the '32 Ford, or Deuce, became *the* car to hot rod and still is to this day. A milestone car that still has people dreaming about it.

7 1955–1957 Chevrolet 150, 210, Bel Air, and Nomad

Price range: \$10,000–\$150,000
Number made: 4.1 million

When you tell somebody to picture a classic Chevy, they

think of a Tri-Five car. First to use the legendary small-block V8, and many performance versions were available. The '55 with its Ferrari-like egg-crate grille and clean styling is the purest of the bunch, while the '56 facelift missed the mark. '57 is by far the flashiest version and inspires “retro” industrial designs to this day. 283/283 '57 was the performance king.

8 1964–1971 Pontiac GTO

Price range: \$10,000–\$500,000
Number made: 500,000

The '64 GTO may not have been the first car with muscle, but it is the first muscle car. Two basic generations are included here, the '64–'67 cars, and the '68–'71. Like everything else, the further out they got, the more they became like Fat Elvis, but they always had style and more than just big engines. Top picks are the early Tri-Power cars, and later Ram Air and HO cars, especially with the Judge package and a top that goes down. Everybody else copied the concept, some for better, some for worse, but there is only one GTO.

9 1955–1961 Chrysler 300 Letter Cars

Price range: \$35,000–\$250,000
Number made: 9,557

Some of the best-looking and best-performing cars ever to roll out of Detroit. Often referred to as “Beautiful Brutes,” the famed Letter Cars were stuffed with huge horsepower and luxury. Tremendous long-haul road cars. I'll take a '61 300G convertible with the rare short-ram intake and Pont-à-Mousson 4-speed manual gearbox, please.

10 1953–1962 Corvette C1

Price range: \$25,000–\$350,000
Number made: 69,015

A limited run of 300 mildly disguised passenger cars masquerading as sports cars in 1953 started perhaps the most legendary car in American automotive history. Almost dead in the water by '54 and saved by the small-block V8 in '55. 1957

brought 1 hp per cubic inch with the 283-ci Fuelie motor and all kinds of performance options. Chevy never looked back. Pick your favorite; there isn't a dog in the bunch, and everybody should own a solid-axle Corvette before they die.

11 1963–1967 Corvette C2

Price range: \$15,000–\$750,000
Number made: 117,964

Not much is better looking than a mid-year Corvette, even 45 years later. Everything from 250-hp small-blocks with 2-speed automatics to the 500-plus-hp L88 427 of 1967 was available. One look and nobody will ever ask why you bought one. The '63 Split Window is the undisputed best-looker, while '65–'67 cars with 4-wheel disc brakes and numerous improvements are the best driving. Garden-variety versions are inexpensive to buy and all are inexpensive to own. Capable, usable, beautiful. How could you not want one?

12 1965–1970 Ford Mustang

Price range: \$5,000–\$500,000
Number made: 3 million

The car that started the Pony Car wars, which is still being duked out in Detroit some 40 years later. Everything from plane-Jane cars to Boss 429 earth movers are here. Pick your generation and size—Small '65–'66, Medium '67–'68, or Large '69–'70. All have plenty of options to suit the desired use. Would we have had Camaros, Challengers, Barracudas, Javelins, etc., without the Mustang?

13 1969 Chevrolet Camaro ZL1

Price range: \$500,000–\$850,000
Number made: 69

What do you get when a Chevy dealer is strong enough to push through a Central Office Production Order for 69 Camaros with an all-aluminum 427-ci engine? The baddest factory-built Camaro ever. Horsepower estimates are around 500, and it feels like all of that. Huge dough for a Camaro, but that's what it takes to have the big dog.

14 Yenko Chevrolet Camaros/Novas/Chevelles

Price range: \$125,000–\$500,000
Number made: 614, all versions

“Supercars” were a big deal in the heyday of muscle cars, and nobody did it better than Don Yenko. From 427 Camaros and



1953 Hudson Hornet with Twin H-Power

Novas to Corvette LT-1-engined Novas, Yenko engineered complete supercars. He called them Yenko Sportsscar Conversions. Good ones are as rare as hen's teeth, but the good news is that Yenko production records exist, so you can verify the real cars from the UFO's, which keeps values safe.

15 1970/1971 Dodge and Plymouth Hemi E-Body convertibles

Price range: \$800,000–\$2,000,000
Number made: 41

Muscle cars are all about excess, and nothing is as ridiculous as a 426 Hemi 'Cuda or Challenger convertible. Buyers figured this out; hence only 41 were ordered. That fact, coupled with the sheer lunacy of 425 hp in a unibody Mopar with the structural rigidity of a toboggan, puts these among the most desired of all muscle cars. Nobody said crappy cars have to be cheap.

16 1953 Buick-Olds-Cadillac “Triple Crown” Cars

Price range: \$100,000–\$300,000
Number made: 2,680 total

In 1953, GM ruled the world and could do whatever it wanted, evidenced by the existence of the Skylark, Eldorado, and Fiesta—largely hand-built show cars that were actually put into

production and sold to the public. GM reportedly lost money on every one, despite selling them for \$5k–\$8k when new, a huge amount in 1953. It's all about image, babe, and GM had it in spades in 1953.

17 1948 Tucker 48

Price range: \$350,000–\$500,000
Number made: 51

Preston Tucker's dream, and the most futuristic and advanced car to hit postwar America in 1948. As flawed as the man himself, but chock full of groundbreaking safety and performance ideas. If Tucker could have made his Spruce Goose fly, who knows what we'd be driving today. Unquestionably a milestone car and a great American tale.

18 1953 Cunningham C4-R and C4-RK

Price range: Mr. Gates, your car is ready
Number made: 3

The definitive Cunningham race car clearly inspired countless similar creations since, including the Shelby Cobra. B.S. Cunningham himself finished 4th at Le Mans in his C4-RK. While the C5-R that followed may have been a better car, to me the C4-R is the one to own. American sportsmanship never looked better.

19 1956–1957 Lincoln Continental Mk II

Price range: \$25,000–\$100,000
Number made: 1,769

Lincoln's shot at a personal “ultra luxury car” to top all others. Meticulously engineered and styled, and hugely expensive for Ford to build. Even with an original price of \$9,900, Ford claimed to have lost over \$1,000 on every one sold. If they'd made five of them, these would be million-dollar cars, so enjoy the selection and discount.

20 1951–1953 Hudson Hornet

Price range: \$15,000–\$100,000
Number made: 106,785

Another postwar milestone car, with performance that other manufacturers couldn't touch until years later—and from a 6-cylinder, too! The “Fabulous Hudson Hornets” absolutely dominated stock car racing for quite some time. The “Twin-H Power”—equipped examples are the ones to get. Style and speed all in one.

There you have it. It's a list as diverse as the American auto industry, and every car listed has its merits and deserves its place here. I'd be willing to wager that when we do a “Top 40” list in 2028, for SCM's four-decade celebration, every one of these cars will still make the cut. ♦