

Back to the Future—and Step on It

The Challenger is a surprisingly solid car, far better than the class-leading Mustang. And yes, it will do a smokey burnout

by Colin Comer

Chrysler's latest entrant into the "retro-muscle" wars, the new Dodge Challenger, has been burning up Internet car chat forums and magazine covers since its introduction. It's a car I've wanted to beat the tar out of, but I hadn't found a willing owner until the last week of July in New York City, when I was invited to the 2009 Dodge Challenger Media First Drive.

For the most part, I like the retro-muscle movement, but I feel something gets lost in translation. These new muscle cars really aren't muscle cars in a traditional sense. They are safe, fast, and expensive interpretations of the originals they loosely replicate. They do everything better on paper but run a character deficit when compared to the clunky old originals. Which isn't such a bad thing in a daily driver, but still...

The new-for-'08 Dodge Challenger was much anticipated. The styling is faithful to the original 1970–71 version, with a little modern flair. It is the best looking of the new crop of muscle cars, but the SRT8 model with a 425-hp 6.1-liter Hemi and 5-speed automatic transmission was the only version available for 2008, much to the dismay of the enthusiast press.

My lawn mower has more cylinders than that

All that has changed for 2009, with the introduction of a new 6-speed manual transmission and a gift from the muscle car gods, a limited-slip differential. Also new for '09 are two other trim levels—the base SE (\$21,995 MSRP) with a 250-hp 3.5-liter V6, and the R/T model with a 372–376-hp (depending on transmission choice) 5.7-liter Hemi (\$29,995 MSRP). These join the big dog 6.1-liter Hemi-equipped SRT8 (\$41,695 MSRP, including gas-guzzler tax).

I must confess, my day of driving the new Challengers did not include the base SE model. My lawn mower has more than six cylinders, so I saw no need to pass up spending a full day in the Hemi R/T and SRT8 versions. It was well worth any flack I may get for not knowing all about the SE model, although I am sure it is wonderful in its own right.

My first drive of the day was in an R/T 6-speed (with Pistol Grip shifter) with a 3.92:1 rear axle ratio, also equipped with 20-inch wheels and the Trak Pak option. Although the R/T is presented as the budget supercar, our tester was "hard loaded," as they say, and had a whopping \$39,000 sticker price.

Leaving the Liberty House in New Jersey on the brick road that leads out of the park, the lack of body flex and squeaks and rattles showed off the structural rigidity of the Chrysler 300 platform under its newest body. On the highway, the 376 hp moved the car along swiftly, although not in supercar territory. Chrysler states 0 to 60 mph in 5.9 seconds, which feels about right. It's a surprisingly solid car with big brakes, decent power, and a great chassis—far better than the class-leading Mustang.

You can feel the better hardware on the SRT

After being disappointed that it didn't seem willing to do a nice smokey burnout on a few feeble attempts, my co-driver and I were pleasantly surprised when I brought the revs up a little higher and did my best water-box-style clutch drop. Yes, it will do a nice smokey burnout. And so will the other Challengers behind you if you do one first.

Next up was track time on the road course at Englishtown Raceway. It was a tight course, with cones laid out for idiot journalists—quickly rearranged by some, I might add. I grabbed a brain bucket and ran for the nearest SRT8 6-speed car. You can im-



I know what you've been smoking

mediately feel the better hardware in the SRT car versus the R/T. And much to my surprise, the first SRT8 I drove had a sticker price of \$40,700, only about a grand more than the loaded 5.7-liter Hemi R/T.

Proof positive that options are baaaad and careful ordering is goood. With the traction and stability controls put into super-secret "really off" mode (don't just tap the ESP button like they want you to, push and HOLD that sucker for about three seconds until it beeps; trust me), these cars are a lot of fun on the track. The Brembo brakes work great, as do the big shoes and SRT chassis tuning. I firmly believe there is not a better group of car guys in Detroit than the crew at Chrysler's SRT division.

They make incredibly competent performance cars, at a reasonable price, and sometimes even from vehicles you would never think could be considered high performance. Think Dodge Neon and Jeep Grand

Cherokee. After putting down laps in two 6-speed SRT8 Challengers, I also tried the 5-speed automatic version, which was equally impressive, something to note for those who hate to row their own.

Not one car acted up on a 100-degree day

Perhaps most impressive was that on a near-100-degree day in New Jersey, with all of these new Challengers getting the hell kicked out of them by a crew of journalists—a/c on full blast non-stop—not one car acted up. The electronic angels kept everybody on the track and all the cars out of harm's way. And that was a big job in some instances.

I made the drive from Englishtown back to NYC in a 6-speed SRT8. Compared to the R/T, it just felt more buttoned down and competent, and the added power (namely, the torque) from the 6.1-liter Hemi is worth the \$10,000 difference in price.

So where does the Challenger fit in the bigger picture? I'd say it is the new king of the retro-muscle wars. All of that may change when the new Camaro comes to market, but for now, Chrysler has come as close as anybody to nailing the idea of modern muscle. Yes, they may lack some soul, and they have a lot more plastic than the originals, but they are reasonably priced, under warranty, safe, and enjoyable to use on a daily basis.

So whether your choice ends up being a Mustang, a Challenger, or the new Camaro, just be sure to enjoy this new era while you can. Much like the original muscle



Perhaps the last of the breed

car era, I don't see readily available, 400-plus horsepower, sub-\$50,000 cars lasting too long in these days of \$4-per-gallon fuel and looming EPA and CAFE standards that will effectively kill anything that gets less than 35 mpg.

Not to mention at some point, just like in the early 1970s, insurance companies have to view these cars as losses waiting to happen. Pretty soon, it may be just like 1972 all over again, so burn rubber while you can. ♦

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