

Becoming a Muscle Car Detective

The best way to determine legitimacy is to understand how these cars were built

Technology has advanced to the point where almost any engine or VIN number can be recreated, and paperwork conjured up from thin air. Plus, as muscle cars continue to escalate in value, many now in the seven-figure range, the sharks in the business smell the blood of the rubes just waiting to be fleeced. We lived through it once before in 1989-91, but then it was vintage Ferraris and Jaguar C- and D-types that were growing like weeds. Today, it's Hemi 'Cudas and COPO Camaros.

Luckily, decoding a car and figuring out exactly what it was when it left the factory are relatively simple tasks.

What follows is a beginner's guide for a basic muscle car "scratch-and-sniff" test, or preliminary inspection. It is not a comprehensive how-to, but rather a guide to help you determine with relative ease just what you are looking at.

Let's start by examining "matching numbers," a common term that is widely abused. Matching numbers implies that a car is exactly as it left the factory, with its original factory-installed engine, transmission, and rear axle. However, to the unscrupulous few, matching numbers can mean that the number they stamped on the engine block five minutes ago matches the number that was on the original one.

First, original paperwork is invaluable in determining if a car is real: window stickers, build sheets, dealer invoices, warranty cards, registration cards, owner history. The more you have, the easier it will be to document the car. I always look at every slip of paper with a car; even the most insignificant receipt may hold valuable information, such as a tune-up that noted engine size, a gas receipt with mileage and date noted, etc.

The best way to determine the legitimacy of numbers is to understand how these cars were built. As mass-produced cars, foundries cast engine blocks and heads, body plants stamped out body shells, and eventually all components formed a finished car. Simple. Every part has a casting number and date, the body has a build date, and the completed car was assigned a date when finished. Obviously, all parts must predate the completed car by a reasonable margin, usually one to three months.

EVERY PART HAS A NUMBER

These time frames vary depending on the plant at which the car was built (engine blocks cast in Detroit were shipped by rail to a plant in L.A., as opposed to being at the factory in Detroit the day of completion), and time of year (Christmas shutdown, for example, slows production and widens the window). This is basic detective work and I always look for consistency within dates on each car, rather than a set time frame. For example, if I find a block was cast in March 1969, I do not expect to find January 1968 cylinder heads. Remember, every part has a number and date on it, even window glass and bumper jacks.

Once you compile and compare all of the important date codes—for example, engine block, cylinder heads, intake manifold, body build date, and car completion date—it is time to look for the all-important "matching numbers."

Prior to 1968, many manufacturers did not have a VIN stamp on the block. This makes learning date codes and having concrete documentation that much more important. Certain high performance cars, such as Corvettes, 1965-67 289 "K code"-equipped Fords and Shelys, did have the VIN on their engine blocks. Post-1968, all cars have at least the last six digits of their serial number somewhere on the engine block and transmission case.



Your car's birthmarks

With the proper research, you can determine how "numbers-matching" your recent find is.

JUST LOOK IT UP

Many books exist on decoding numbers, including what casting numbers are correct, where to find them, and how to decode every component on the car. A decent book on any make you are considering is money well spent. The Internet is also a powerful research tool. Google "Chevrolet casting numbers" for instance, and look at what comes up. Numerous online communities exist for most popular cars. More often than not, these discussion boards can be very helpful with specific questions.

If considering a Pontiac GTO, the best \$35 you will ever spend is ordering a Pontiac Historic Services report. These reports are worth their weight in gold. From the original factory records, Jim Mattison of PHS will provide you with copies of the original factory invoice and build card when provided with a VIN number. If you are in a hurry, for \$10 extra PHS will fax you a copy immediately. Even though a seller may have his own PHS documents, as copies of originals, they are easily altered and I do not deem them reliable unless I obtain them myself. Go to www.phs-online.com and follow the instructions to order your report.

For Shelby shoppers, go to www.saac.com and order a copy of the Shelby American World Registry. In this 1,400-page monster is every Shelby ever built, with known history listed for each individual car. There are sections on each year, production changes, part numbers, and hints and tips. Do not buy a Shelby without looking it up in the Registry.

I also recommend joining the club to gain access to

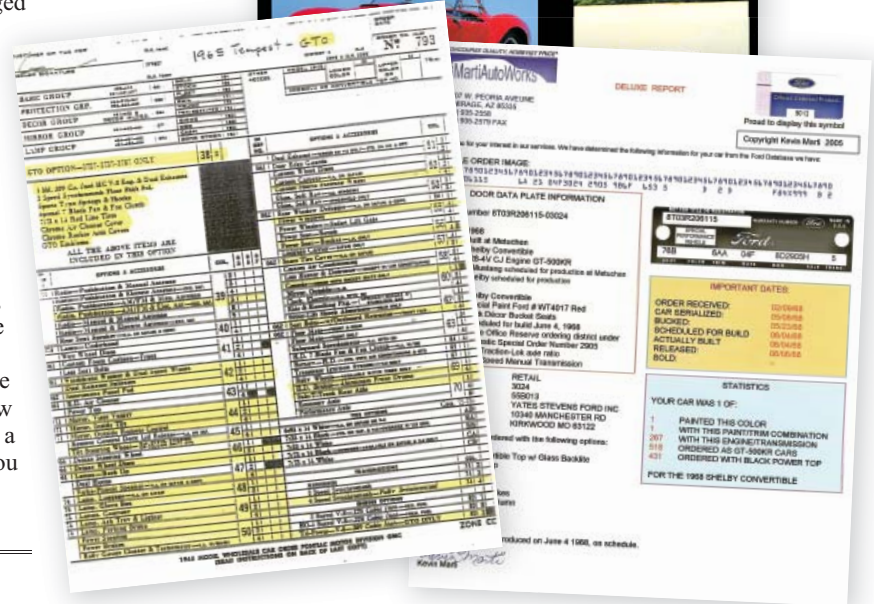
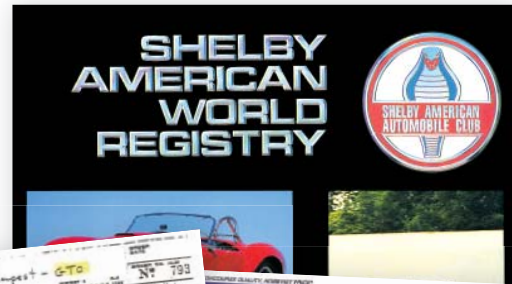
the registrars who can help you with additional information on particular cars. These guys are the best and the club support offered by SAAC is second to none.

Ford buyers can contact Marti Auto Works for a complete report on any Ford car from 1967-73. Kevin Marti has Ford's entire production database for these years. Please note that these records also include all Shelby Mustangs produced from 1967-70 as well, and I highly recommend a Marti report in addition to checking the SAAC Registry. Marti Auto Works is on line at www.martiauto.com.

For Chrysler products, Galen V. Govier is the acknowledged authority. His company offers a wide range of services from basic decoding of cars over the phone to an on-site evaluation anywhere in the U.S. Govier also maintains The Chrysler Registry, which tracks all known examples of certain cars, at www.gvgovier.com

Above all, educate yourself on any car you are looking at and enlist the services of experts when needed. The time and expense of performing proper investigation is insignificant compared to the values of most cars. Chances are, you'll find that being a muscle car detective can have double rewards—first, in the knowledge you will gain, and second, by the sense of assurance you'll get knowing you've done your homework.

Of course, there are no guarantees, and even some of the world's top collectors are fooled by clones and air-cars now and then. But at least if you do your homework, you've got a running start on having the car you buy turn out to be what you thought it was, rather than a forger's delight.♦



COLIN COMER is founder and president of Colin's Classic Automobiles, as well as an avid collector and enthusiast.

Protect your investment, do your homework

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