

Everyday Muscle

Forgo modern conveniences (such as a jack for your iPod and seat heaters), and you can find an old car that will be daily fun



1965 Ford Mustang GT fastback

So your Cobra Daytona Coupe is too hot and loud inside, and your Hemi 'Cuda convertible's top leaks when it rains. You'd like something old yet practical as a daily driver, something you might even let your significant other or kids drive once in a while.

Anybody with a pulse and a checking account can walk into a Ford dealership today and buy a new Mustang GT, but a vintage "real" muscle car is far more fun. With a little thought and willingness to forgo modern conveniences (such as a jack for your iPod and seat heaters), you can find an old car that will be fun to live with on a daily basis.

What follows are five examples of great "all rounders." They have ample power, handle, stop, and steer almost as well as a contemporary car—and if not, they can be made to do so with a little help.

1964½–66 Ford Mustang V8

The quintessential pony car, a vintage Ford Mustang can be a great and rewarding car to live with. My favorites are the lean 1964 1/2–1966 versions, but the 1967–1968 and 1969–1970 cars all share the same basic architecture. They just gained a little weight and lost some of their reflexes.

The best advice is to keep it simple—an early car with the 289-ci "A code" V8 engine, which is a factory four-barrel motor with hydraulic valve lifters. At 225 hp, these are tough little motors that rarely complain. The enthusiast's choice would be a 4-speed, but the Cruise-o-Matic slushbox is okay. Factory air was available (and easily added, as it looks like aftermarket anyway), along

with power steering and disc brakes.

The best part is that the aftermarket loves these cars, and all kinds of really simple bolt-on upgrades are readily available, from three-point seat belts to overdrive transmissions, suspension and brake kits. With the right tweaks, a good early Mustang can run with a 2007 version, but has a heck of a lot more style. Buy the best '65–'66 fastback "A code" car you can for \$35,000 and budget \$5,000–\$10,000 to make it work as well as it looks.

1967–69 Chevrolet Camaro V8

Another pony car that needs no introduction. My choice would be a 1967 SS 350 convertible with the 295-hp V8, factory air, power steering, and power disc brakes. Give me a dorky automatic transmission so I can drop in a late-model 4-speed automatic overdrive conversion and be able to cruise at 75 mph at 2,000 rpm. You can't hurt a mild Chevy small block, and set up right, these cars handle and stop a lot better than people think.

The year you pick is based on personal preference; they are all the same underneath. You can damn near build a complete early Camaro from a mail-order catalog for next to nothing, and they are cheap and simple to



1967 Chevrolet Camaro SS 350

maintain. When you are done having your fun, you'll have buyers lined up at your door. Early Camaros never go out of style. For \$35,000, you get a really good small-block car, and again, figure another \$5,000–\$10,000 to dial it in.

1970–71 Plymouth 'Cuda and Dodge Challenger 340 4-bbl

These cars lacked a lot of the quality the others came with. The good news is that over the last 36-plus years, the good cars have had these issues ironed out. While it may not wow the Bob's Big Boy crowd like having a Hemi under the hood, my pick for a daily driver is the 340-ci, 4-barrel, 275-hp V8.



1971 'Cuda 340

be my choice, but they also come in open-air versions. Get some wide steel wheels under it and put on stock hubcaps and speed-rated radial whitewall tires. Make sure to tuck up that dual exhaust and try to hide your sinister grin when you go out canyon carving. Buy a stud for \$25,000, add in all the crazy stuff for \$5,000–\$10,000, and go Civic Si hunting.

With all of these cars, make sure to do your homework and buy the best. Like every car out of Detroit at the time, all are notorious rusters. You can't build a good daily driver on a patched-up or previously twisted donor. Pick the one you like, seek out an authority on that particular car, and tell him your expectations. These are fun cars to get up to modern standards, and even more fun to live with. They are a heck of a lot more unusual than any modern cookie-cutter car, and hold their value well. Remember, when they were new, they were used day-in and day-out. No reason you can't do the same today. ♦

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This is another incredibly over-built and under-stressed small block. They run cool, and I've even seen them run without oil (although I wouldn't recommend that trick). With the 340 in the nose, the front torsion bar and rear leaf spring chassis are quite well balanced. Modern tweaks such as quick-ratio steering boxes and big brakes can really help. Set up the suspension with AAR 'Cuda or T/A Challenger specs for the best results. Add a good set of radial tires and you are set.

Be sure to inspect any prospective purchase carefully, as a good 'Cuda or Challenger may be tough to find. The 1971 'Cudas are the most expensive, and a good one will be \$60,000 or better. Shoot for a great 1970 340 'Cuda for around \$45,000, or a Challenger for even less. Same rules as the others; keep \$5,000–\$10,000 to make it reliable.

1968–69 Dodge Dart GTS 340

A car that is really cool because it is so uncool, the Dodge Dart GTS is a lot like the 340 'Cuda and Challenger—just not sexy. Think about it: a lighter car with the same basic motor. No blind spots, high seating position, just a user-friendly car all-around. The best part is these cars really scoot with a 340 under the hood. Get one with a 4-speed. Less performance-oriented than some of the other choices here, these too can be brought up to modern ride and handling levels quite easily.

I know one fellow currently building his for a cross-country rally, with good brakes, modern a/c, etc. You can do the same thing. The guy in the new 350Z won't know what hit him when your "Pee-Wee Herman" car blows his doors off. About \$35,000 gets you a great one, another \$10,000 down the hatch and you'll have a world-class pocket rocket. Want a little wind in your hair? Look for a convertible for another \$5,000.

1963–65 Ford Falcon Sprint

I've recommended these before, and I am doing it again. This is the chassis upon which Ford built the Mustang, so all that fancy aftermarket Mustang upgrade stuff will bolt on. Talk about stealth. Same famous 260/289 Ford V8, easy to build, fun to drive, hard to kill. A hard top would



1967 Dodge Dart GTS



1964 Falcon Sprint