REBEL FORCE

Muscle car (mus'el kar) – Intermediate (116in. wheelbase) or smaller car powered by a powerful V8 engine, most typically displacing 300 cubic inches or more.' By that definition, did American Motors build America's first true muscle car? Richard Truesdell investigates...

FIRST MUSCLE? - TALE OF THE TAPE

	19	57 R	amb	ler l	Rebe	el	1	964	Pon	tiac	GTC)
Length			19	1.1	inch	es	2	203.0	inch	nes		
Wheelb	ase		10	8.0	inch	es	1	15.0	incł	nes		
Weight			- 33	53lb	s		3	3122	bs			
Displac	eme	ent	- 32	7cu	.in.		3	89c	u.in.			
Horsep	owe	r	25	5bh	р		З	825b	hp			
Power-	to-w	/eigh	t									
ratio			13	3:1			ę	9.6:1				
0-60mp	oh (s	ecs)		`		Tren	'	•	Car L	ife)		
Price			\$2	786			9	277	6			
Units p	rodu	Iced	15	00			3	32,45	0			

48

B Y the most common definition, similar to that written above, most automotive enthusiasts credit the 1964 Pontiac Tempest GTO (GTO being an option package that could be ordered with a Tempest) as having been the first mass-produced muscle car. But in reality, using this same definition as the primary criteria, one can argue that the first true muscle car was not a Pontiac Tempest GTO, but was instead, the 1957 Nash Rambler Rebel. The Rambler Rebel, you say? You must be joking!

The story behind the anomaly that is the Rambler Rebel goes back to 1954 when Hudson and Nash merged, forming American Motors. This was prompted by the turn from a seller's to a buyer's market as the industry caught up with pent-up demand following the end of World War Two. Nash, the stronger of the two partners, had established a niche with the compact Rambler starting in 1950. Built on a 100in. wheelbase, it had no competition from Detroit's Big Three, Chrysler, Ford and GM. In 1954 the line was expanded with fourdoor models built on a 108in. wheelbase, which was still small by US standards of the era, nevertheless, sales continued to expand steadily, if not slowly. The presi-

dent of American Motors at the time was George Romney and he staked his



company's future on the compact Rambler. He realised, correctly, that the larger Nash and Hudson models (which were reskinned versions of their Nash counterparts) would require massive investments to remain competitive with their Big Three competitors. While AMC planned to extensively restyle the Rambler line for 1957, just after the merger, he initiated a crash programme to accelerate the next generation Rambler, bringing out an allnew line of 108in. wheelbase, four-door Ramblers for the 1956 model year.

At the same time, realising that the public was demanding powerful V8 engines, he instituted a second crash programme, to develop an in-house V8 engine. Previously, AMC purchased a 320cu.in. engine from Packard, which was fitted to the senior Nash and Hudson models in an effort to make them more competitive in the marketplace. It was not successful. Also contributing to Romney's desire to develop an AMC V8, was that Packard had reneged on an agreement to purchase components from AMC.

The result of the V8 programme was a



modern 250cu.in. 190bhp V8 that was first installed in the engine bay of the larger 1956 Nash and Hudson models. For 1957, its displacement was enlarged to 327cu.in. (not to be confused with an engine of similar displacement, but with different bore and stroke from Chevrolet) rated at 255bhp. With a fourbarrel carburettor, it was originally destined for the Nash Ambassador but someone at AMC had the idea of installing it in the engine bay of the much lighter Rambler.

The result was the 1957 Rambler Rebel, a limited production run of 1500 units. Based on the stylish four-door hardtop (pillarless) version of the 108in. wheelbase Rambler, all the Rebel models were distinguished by their silver paint accented with gold-anodized sweepspear side trim combined with unique badging (the silver paint has a propensity to fade and many of the cars were repainted). All Rebels were equipped with adjustable Gabriel shock



absorbers on all four corners matched to heavy duty springs. The result was reduced body roll, something that stood in stark contrast to American cars of that era. While not as stiff as European cars, it was definitely a step in the right direction.

The powerful V8 was mated to either a standard three-speed manual transmission with overdrive, or an optional dual-range, fourspeed HydroMatic automatic transmission sourced from General Motors as AMC could not afford to tool-up a suitable unit on their own. Originally AMC planned to offer a fuelinjected, 288bhp version of the 327 V8, but the advanced, electronically-controlled Bendix Electrojector fuel injection system proved unreliable, and it was not offered to the general public. There are reports that some cars were delivered with the system but that it was removed by dealers before the cars were sold. Other reports indicate three or four cars were delivered with the Electrojector system intact but to this day, no-one has been able to verify this, and no documented fuel injectorequipped cars have ever turned up.

Fuel injection notwithstanding, the 1957 Rebel was one hot performer. Independent road tests in 1957 quoted 0-60mph times from 7.2 to 7.8 seconds, remarkable for the era and quite respectable even today. With the exception of the fuel-injected, 283cu.in. Corvette, the Rebel was the fastest American built car of 1957; certainly it was the fastest four-door, six passenger car available from any manufacturer, anywhere in the world in 1957.

You would think that the 1957 Rambler Rebel would be better known than it is and given the respect that it's due, but the sad truth is that outside of AMC enthusiasts, it is virtually unknown. Even many AMC fans are unaware of its existence. Had it been built by one of the Big Three, this would certainly not be the case. As a result, its place in automotive history is both obscure and murky. In reality, using the definition most commonly applied to Pontiac's 1964 GTO, it is America's first true muscle car. The 1957 Nash Rambler Rebel you see pic-





TOP: HOW MANY 'MUSCLE CARS' COULD BE OPTIONED WITH CONTI-NENTAL KIT?! ABOVE: DON'T LET THE QUAINT TWO-TONE PAINT FOOL YOU – THIS WAS A REAL BEAST IN ITS DAY. IMAGINE SEEING THAT **GRILLE FILLING YOUR** REAR-VIEW MIRROR LEFT: AMC'S OWN 327 WAS AVAILABLE MANY YEARS BEFORE THE CHEVROLET SMALL-BLOCK OF THE SAME DISPLACE-MENT, AND WAS OUITE THE **POWERHOUSE. THIS ONE'S** A SINGLE FOUR-BARREL UNIT, THOUGH FUEL INJEC-TION WAS MOOTED TO BEGIN WITH

tured here belongs to Dick Karmann of AMC's home town of Kenosha, Wisconsin, Classic American had the opportunity to view this spectacular surviving example while attending the 100th Anniversary of the Rambler held in 2002 in Kenosha. Karmann has owned this car since 1995, having purchased it from its previous owner in Florida. Its history prior to this is unknown, however this is a true numbersmatching example. Being born and raised in Kenosha, Karmann, whose family owns a local furniture store, wanted an AMC car that was both rare and fast. With the Rebel (the muscle car that never was!), he was successful on both counts. What Karmann likes most about his Rebel is the four-door hardtop design, making it a unique, yet practical vehicle.

Words

& photography:

Richard

Not only has the car been maintained in virtually original condition, but to this day, it remains a great driver. Its compact dimensions combined with its powerful V8, give a real feel for just how advanced this car was in its day. While stock Tri-Five Chevys set a benchmark for Fifties cruisers, they pale in comparison when driven side-by-side with the more powerful, lightweight unibody Rebel. While a stock Tri-Five Chevy feels like a 40-year-old car, the Rebel feels far more contemporary, more like a Sixties car, possibly even a muscle car. One of the great automotive 'what if?' questions remains: what would a fuel-injected, 288horsepower Rebel drive like? It may well have been the first American four-door capable of a sub-seven-second 0-60 sprint.

You can certainly make a strong case for any one of a number of American performance cars, such as the Chrysler 300, to wrest the title of first muscle car away from Pontiac's seminal 1964 GTO. But if you accept the standard definition of intermediate or smaller sedan stuffed with the biggest V8 that would fit between the wheel wells, then the 1957 Nash Rambler Rebel must be given its due. While it wasn't able to offer advanced electronic fuel injection as hoped, it did establish the blueprint which almost a decade later, spawned a group of cars that will be revered as long as there are drivers who relish power and performance in the extreme.

50