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VANISHING POINT

With script in hand, we follow in Kowalski's Vanishing Point trip to

IF EVER THERE WAS A SPECIFIC MUSCLECAR INEXORABLY LINKED TO A PARTICULAR MOVIE, IT HAS TO BE BARRY NEWMAN'S WHITE 1970 DODGE CHALLENGER R/T IN THE 1971 CULT CLASSIC VANISHING POINT (WITH APOLOGIES TO STEVE MCQUEEN'S HIGHLAND GREEN MUSTANG IN BULLIT).

And two and a half years ago, when I first saw the 2006 Dodge Challenger Concept in the styling dome at the Chrysler Technical Center in Auburn Hills before it was unveiled at the 2006 North American International

Automobile Show, I knew that if the car ever made it to production I'd have to duplicate Kowalski's epic adventure.

It's not an original concept for car journalists to embark on such adventures.

Many have made the run previously but it was my hope to be the first to drive Colorado to California in the new 2008 Dodge Challenger SRT8 along with an original 1970 Challenger. This was made possible given the support of Buzz Graves, a printing executive from Reno, Nevada, who offered up his stunningly restored 1970 Dodge Challenger R/T Hemi for the trip. While the car is restored to its original glory, Buzz is not afraid to drive it; in 2006 it participated in our Challenger Concept drive (Musclecar Enthusiast, September 2006) as well as last year's Muscle Car 1000. Due to other obligations, Buzz would join up with us on day two in Salt Lake City and driving the car from Denver would be his brother Holly Graves, a restaurateur from Las Vegas.

We had four other members who made up our crew, Heath Nelson of Team Performance (TEAM-PPI.com), a maker of twin turbo upgrades for Ford Mustangs. Heath is working on a twin turbo application for the 6.1-liter Hemi; his own 2006 Dodge Charger SRT8 is serving as a development mule for this future product. George Gubler, a retired Oregon marshal, was invited by Buzz to join the

Challengers new and old, parked in front of the remains of the Shell station in Cisco, Utah.



TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD TRUESDELL

POINT: THE SEQUEL

fire tracks in both new and old Challengers

program given that he is a Mopar enthusiast and something of an adventurer himself. And finally Buzz tapped good friend Brain Wilson, who owns a body shop in Reno, to tow the Challenger to Denver while Holly flew up from Las Vegas. The Ram tow vehicle would serve as our support vehicle.

The premise was simple. Using repeated viewings of Vanishing Point, massive Internet research, and a copy of the actual shooting script, we were able to connect the dots and determine the route that James "Jimmy" Kowalski drove from Denver to his intended destination, San Francisco. Dodge cooperated by supplying a silver Dodge Challenger SRT8, fresh from the press launch in Pasadena.

DAY ONE - DENVER, COLORADO TO MOAB, UTAH 360 MILES

The day started with a cross-town run in rush hour traffic to the offices of the Auto Driveaway Company on Evans, the spiritual successor to Argo's Delivery Agency, the car delivery service immortalized in Vanishing Point. Located in a non-descript industrial office building, if Kowalski was looking to pick up a driveaway for a run to the West Coast today, this is probably where he'd look.



Challengers old and new, along with Steve Hinkley's 1969 Dodge Polara 440 4-speed 2-door hardtop at a Holiday Convenience Store north of Salt Lake City, Utah.





Hey, Kowalski's got nothing on us. That's Karl Krohn's supercharged 2006 Dodge Charger patrol car laying down the law.

Joe Bond's Sub Lime 1970 Dodge Challenger Six Pack and Mike McCoy's purple 1970 Dodge Challenger R/T Hemi in the service bay with our Challenger at Larry H. Miller Dodge in Sandy, Utah.



We weren't being chased by cops like Kowalski, but driving the original Challenger in rush hour traffic was still a harrowing experience. Buzz' car is equipped with a 4-speed manual transmission – originally it was a 383 R/T with a 3-speed TorqueFlite – so Holly had to navigate bumper-to-bumper traffic. On the way back to the hotel, he had to contend with drivers repeatedly cutting in front of him as he lagged just a bit behind the new Challenger.

Heading west out of Denver on I-70, we photographed both cars at the Eisenhower Tunnel, 11,013 feet above sea level. Yes, the '70 Challenger had a bit of a time adjusting to the rarified air over two miles up but no more than the rest of our crew.

The long, three-lane downgrade out of the tunnel past Dillon gave us ample opportunity to shoot both cars with the spectacular Colorado Mountains in the background. As there was still snow on the ground, looking through the lens at the two cars was a rare and impressive sight.

In Avon it was my turn to get behind the wheel of the Challenger R/T. I drove the R/T two years ago on the Concept Car drive and it was obvious that Buzz had substantially upgraded virtually every aspect of the car, bringing it up to as-new condition. The biggest change was ditching the automatic

transmission for the 4-speed, now connected to a 3.73:1 rear end.

While Buzz takes great pride in his factory-correct 8-Track, the only music I was interested in was what was coming from under the shaker hood. Getting situated behind the wheel, the car felt tight, tighter than almost any other vintage musclecar I've driven. While the 1,500-mile drive up to Denver had acclimated me to the new Challenger, it in no way prepared me for my time behind the wheel of the '70 R/T Hemi. Where the new Challenger is totally competent in every measurable way, with softly padded bucket seats, modern climate control and the Kicker audio system, I felt somewhat disconnected from the road.

Such was not the case with the '70 R/T Hemi. With the windows down, my vision of heading west on I-70 was fulfilled as I could almost imagine the orange exterior turning to white as I was transported back in time to the summer of 1970 when the Vanishing Point film team first covered the exact same route. The best part of the run was through the Glenwood Springs Canyon, the elevated roadway, which was built long after the 19

members of director Richard C. Sarafian's crew headed west on US 6. Here I put the R/T through it paces; coming off the gas in an original Hemi is an experience that every petrol head should experience once in life, surpassed only by gunning it through the tunnels approaching Glenwood Springs.

Heading west on the flat stretch of I-70 between Glenwood Springs and Rifle, where Kowalski had his first encounter with the motorcycle cops, I put in a call to Buzz back in Reno, to tell him that driving his car was a truly singular driving experience. In Rifle, I had to be pried out of the car before heading to our last photo stop of the day, the ghost town of Cisco, Utah.

Here we struck photographic pay dirt. The climactic scene in *Vanishing Point*, set in Cisco, California, was actually filmed in Cisco, Utah, and sitting out in an open field, almost calling us, was a bulldozer. As the dirt was firm, we did several drive-bys, each car alone and both together. Using a slow shutter speed in the fading light, we were able to give the illusion of Kowalski crashing his Challenger through the barriers. It was especially rewarding for Holly, behind the



We didn't encounter any naked hippie chicks riding dirt bikes, as Kowalski did in the movie. But in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, east of Tonopah, Nevada on US 6 we met Finisa Medrano and her horse-drawn effort to rewild the American West. (pullingforwildflowers.org)

wheel of the '70 R/T. (In reviewing Vanishing Point afterwards, I was able to determine that our bulldozer was actually just 100 yards due south of the position of the two Caterpillar D8s used in the film.)

With spectacular light fading we picked up some static shots in front of the remains of the Shell station. The rich light really enhanced the lines of both Challengers. But parked side-by-side, the '70 R/T was really dwarfed by its modern counterpart, necessitating in almost every shot that it be placed in the foreground, closest to the camera.

DAY TWO - MOAB, UTAH TO WEST WENDOVER, NEVADA 370 MILES

Day two turned out to be far more eventful



As dusk approached on day two and we were finishing up shooting for the day, we encountered a horrific one-car wreck on I-80 that unfolded right before us as the rear axle apparently snapped on a Ford Explorer sending it cartwheeling six times before ending up in a ditch along the side of the road. It was fortuitous that we invited George on the trip. A former Oregon Highway Marshal, George immediately took command of the scene before help arrived. Calmly, he called in to 911 where he was instructed on how to stop the bleeding and apply proper pressure. It was around 40 degrees and the driver, Jeremy Ulidarri, who had crawled from the overturned wreckage, had already lost a great deal of blood from a severe foot injury. He remained conscious as we all tried to settle him down and keep him warm with blankets. Even though we were in a relatively remote stretch of I-80 80 miles east of Wendover, the EMTs arrived within 15 minutes and fully stabilized the situation. The Utah Highway Patrol called in to the University of Utah medical center for an airlift and closed down I-80 so that the driver could be evacuated. From the time of the accident to the point when the chopper departed the scene, less than 45 minutes had elapsed. (In a post script to the accident, Buzz spoke with the Jeremy the following Monday just before he was released from the hospital, less than a week later. He had his leg amputated at mid-calf but realized how lucky he was and thanked everyone for saving his life.)

than anticipated with snow in the mountains between Price, Utah, and Salt Lake City. But this didn't dampen the spirits of Salt Lake City's Mopar community as more than three dozen of them met us at 2 p.m. at Larry H. Miller Dodge in Sandy, including two who braved snow to drive their own '70 Challengers to the dealership. While we were greeted by Steve Hinckley, a parts advisor at the dealership, Buzz was flying in from Reno and arrived at

the dealership a little bit after 3 p.m.

And with the help of Karl Krohn of Absolute Performance (absoluteperformance.com), who brought his supercharged 2006 Dodge Charger police car, done up in the livery of the Utah State Police, we were able to enlist the cooperation of the Sandy Police Department, who blocked off a busy street at rush hour. Thus we captured the first video of a new Challenger and a new Charger cop car in an O. J. Simpson-style low speed chase.

Afterwards, we caravanned westward as a passenger in Steve's 1969 4-speed Dodge Polara 2-door hardtop. Others making the drive included Mike McCoy in a purple 1970 Dodge Challenger R/T Hemi, Joe Bond in a Sub Lime 1970 Dodge Challenger 440 Six Pack, and John Bechard in a white 1971 Plymouth Road Runner Hemi, all who braved near freezing temperatures and snow showers. By the time we reached I-80 west, the skies cleared and we were able to get some spectacular shots bounded by the Great Salt Lake.



Here Scott Sinton of Sinton Helicopters gets to play James W. Gavin who was the helicopter pilot and aerial stunt coordinator who buzzed the Challenger in Vanishing Point.



The navigation system helped us find a Sonic Hamburgers in Rifle, Colorado.

DAY THREE - WEST WENDOVER, UTAH, TO LAS VEGAS, NEVADA 520 MILES

As much as we thought we had seen everything on Thursday, Friday proved to be an even bigger day, as at every turn we encountered one form of good fortune after

another. This was going to be our longest day's drive on the trip, more than 500 miles through Ely, Tonopah, and Goldfield before arriving in Las Vegas about 6 p.m.

As we were deep in the heart of the Bonneville Salt Flats, home of numerous land speed records, we backtracked to get a location shot of both Challengers next to the Bonneville exit sign on I-80, as director Sarafian mentioned this in his DVD commentary. Next we headed southwest on Alt US 93 with our first stop being Chuck and Bessie's Stage Stop, a gas station, café, and grocery store in Lages Junction where Alt US 93 rejoins US 93, reminding us of several locations from Vanishing Point, specifically the Mobil station with the female attendant. There we were welcomed with open arms by Ruth Radford. Because of the great distances between gas stations, and the way that Buzz '70 Hemi guzzles dead dinosaurs, it's always a good idea to keep the tank topped off.

Near Ely – pronounced "E-lee" – we had an opportunity to finally put the pedal to the metal on the new Challenger at an, er, undisclosed test location. In spite of being more than 6,000 feet above sea level and bucking something of a head wind, we were



An indicated 160 mph, at 6,000 feet above sea level, into a 15 mph headwind. Later, closer to sea level, we pushed the SRT8 up to 165 mph, closer to its claimed 173 mph top speed.

able to push the envelope up to 160 mph.

From Ely we headed west on US 6 towards Tonopah, which was another of the filming locations used in Vanishing Point. We thought that there would be an Extraterrestrial Highway sign marking the northern start of Nevada 375 in Warm Springs, as there is at the southern start point north of Ash Springs but we couldn't find it. Because we were so tight on time, we decided to press on to Tonopah where we had one of the strangest encounters on our entire 3,000-mile journey.

Behind the wheel of the R/T and with the vast expanse of the high desert unfolding before me, I really felt as if I was Kowalski, as George and I had the opportunity to savor the soundtrack provided by 426 cubic inches of classic Hemi power. And going in the opposite direction we passed, of all things, a covered wagon. It seems that Finisa Medrano was spreading wildflower seeds (pullingforwildflowers.org) in a one-woman effort to rewild the American West. (It dawned on me that we are probably on the opposite end of the ecological spectrum; while Finisa rewilds Idaho, Nevada, and California, we are consuming vast quantities of fossil fuels.)

We motored in to Goldfield which was the location of Super Soul's radio station in the movie. Goldfield is just a former shell of its boom-time self but there is a beauty in its weather-worn starkness. And again, good fortune shined down on us as Sergeant Scott Johnson of the Esmeralda County Sheriff's Office had to check out what our group of four strangers was doing in town. It turns out that Sergeant Johnson is a Mopar owner as well, a 1970 Charger R/T, and knew at first glance that we motored into town in a 2008 Challenger so he indulged us with an impromptu photo shoot where the entire team was "arrested" in front of the Goldfield Hotel,

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With the Silver Island Mountains in the background, the Challenger SRT8 reflects on what it would be like to make a run on the Bonneville Salt Flats.

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which served as the set of radio station KOW in the movie.

Now we were coming down the home stretch, approaching Las Vegas, instead of Cisco, California, where the Mopars of Las Vegas would be waiting for us instead of the California Highway Patrol, on the parking deck of New York, New York. As we were leaving Goldfield about the time we originally expected to be in Las Vegas, we knew we needed to get back on the road if we were to arrive before the sun set. As Buzz was running 3.73 gears, we decided to up our speed in what would

be a vain attempt to arrive in Las Vegas before sundown.

As we pulled on to the parking deck at New York, New York, we were greeted by an enthusiastic crowd of more than a dozen Mopars who waited an extra two hours to see us end the day's leg. It didn't take long before security took notice of our gathering and we were asked to leave. Thankfully, in the continuing spirit of the event, one of the Las Vegas Mopar owners, who brought a stunning Challenger SE, works at The Orleans Hotel Casino and got us permission to move our party over

there. At 10 p.m. we said our goodbyes, knowing that a spectacular adventure had come to a very successful conclusion.



Director Richard C. Sarafian's Commentary on the Vanishing Point DVD

- In the film, Kowalski meets his fate in Cisco, California, as shown on the map in the command center of the California Highway Patrol. The only problem with this is that the Cisco, California in the movie was in reality Cisco, Utah.
- Sarafian had a small crew, 19 in all, much like our own crew of five, that traveled up to 400 miles per day, to each day's location.
- According to director Sarafian in his director's comments on the Vanishing Point DVD, eight Challengers were used in the film. Only one was left intact at the end of filming.
- Vanishing Point had a \$1.3 million budget. It went \$80,000 over budget due to the addition of a full soundtrack album. Sarafian said that he lost profit points as a result, and thus he refers to the film as Vanishing Points.
- In its release in Communist countries, the film portrayed America as a decadent, drug-infested country.
- Vanishing Point was Cleavon Little's first significant film role; he came from Broadway and wasn't used to the fast pace of making a film with a small crew and miniscule budget. It was also John Amos' first film.
- Bike crashes early in the film were comprised of actual shots spliced with stock footage.



Something we did a lot of, spending time at the pump with two Hemi Challengers, here at Chuck and Bessie's Stage Stop, in Lages Junction, Utah. Surprisingly, the SRT8 delivered more than 21 mpg over the 3,000-mile round trip. many people thought that the new Challenger was the new Camaro — ironic given that in the film's climactic scene it was a 1967 Camaro that was crashed into the bulldozers. Coincidence or just ironic?

- Gene Hackman was the original choice by Sarafian to play Kowalski; Hackman then went on to play "Popeye" Doyle in The French Connection.
- Cary Lofton, who also did the stunt driving in Bullitt, set the standard for stunt driving. He recently died, and in the opinion of Sarafian, he was the best, and died the best.
- According to Sarafian's DVD commentary, he didn't try to direct a shot while it was happening, he let his people, especially the stunt drivers, do their thing. Nothing was storyboarded, Sarafian said that it was as if the film was written by a director; it was very improvisational. ■