

Valid Concept

Dodge gives *Musclecar Enthusiast* the opportunity to drive the Challenger Concept, and in 2008 you'll be able to drive one too

TEXT BY RICHARD TRUESDELL / IMAGES BY THE AUTHOR AND DAIMLERCHRYSLER

THE LOOK WAS BOTH FAMILIAR AND DIFFERENT. THE SEATS, A COMBINATION OF '70S STITCHING AND CONTEMPORARY COMFORT AND SUPPORT, WERE LIFTED ALMOST INTACT FROM A CHARGER SRT8. THE CENTER CONSOLE DISPLAYED LONG FORGOTTEN CONTOURS, UPDATED WITH MODERN DETAILING AND MATERIALS. CLOSING THE DOOR, THE FEEL WAS AGAIN STRANGELY FAMILIAR, LACKING THE SOLID FEEL THAT WE TAKE FOR GRANTED IN THE LOWLIEST KOREAN ECONOBOX, OWING IN PART TO THE FACT THAT THE DOOR THAT I'M CLOSING, WITH ITS ORANGE EXTERIOR AND DARK CHARCOAL TRIM ACCENTED WITH BRUSHED ALUMINUM, IS CONNECTED TO THE MOST EXCITING, MOST ANTICIPATED CAR OF THE LAST DECADE, THE ONE-OF-A-KIND DODGE CHALLENGER CONCEPT.

It was a couple weeks before the official announcement came on July 1 that Dodge would put the new-generation Challenger into production in 2008 that I found myself comfortably situated behind the wheel, looking over the sensuously designed sculpture penned by exterior designer Michael Castiglione. I turned the key, and the 6.1-liter modern day Hemi came to life, the exhaust tuned to give the car a throaty rumble, not at all unlike its 426ci predecessor (and I know, as I'd just driven one painted almost the same hue). I pulled out onto the Pacific Coast Highway, one of the lucky souls who never in a million years thought he'd live long enough to drive a "new" Challenger, if only in concept form. For someone who has driven some of the finest cars on the planet, some at over 180 mph, cruising at 55 I felt as if I was supersonic and 17 again...what a great way to start the day, any day.

While the Challenger Concept is clearly a work-in-process, this is so much more than another concept car. That's immediately apparent the moment you get your mitts around the thick-rimmed steering wheel dominated by the Ram's head center hub. Unlike so many concept cars, with all their fanciful (and non-operational) details, this is a car that clearly has all the i-s dotted and the T-s crossed and is just a radio knob or a windshield wiper or two away from production reality.

The forward thinking of interior designer Alan Barrington's interpretation of what a modern musclecar interior should be is spot on, an almost perfect mix of heritage elements, modern adaptation combined with a businesslike feel that is in perfect harmony with its exterior. The execution of the gauges, which emulate the layout of the early Challenger cluster with the look of engine block, are accented with a satin aluminum finish that feels entirely in keeping with how one would expect a modern day Challenger to look.

As expected, the clutch action is heavy and it's necessary to manhandle the shifter, given its Viper origins. Pulling out, it's easy to forget that you're behind the wheel of a one-off that's conservatively valued at \$2 million. For our real world drive, the Challenger's handlers removed the show car 20- and 21-inch rims, replacing them with standard 20-inch Charger SRT8 rolling stock. This turned out to be more of a benefit than we could have imagined as, later, other media types would attempt their drives with the show car rubber, which would hit the fender





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Owners of vintage Challengers (left to right) Reno Debon, Challen Yee, Buzz Graves and Randy Reddig gave the concept a thumbs-up. “Historically and in a contemporary perspective, the new Challenger is awesome,” Graves said. “It’s the most accurate representation to an original car of any retro car.”

wells at the slightest provocation.

If there ever was a perfect place to savor your first time behind the wheel of the Challenger Concept, it would have to be the stretch of the Pacific Coast Highway, California 1, south from Carmel to the equally iconic, picture postcard beautiful, Bixby Creek Bridge. Even the heavy overcast skies couldn't dampen our enthusiasm from behind the wheel. The sight of a bearded hitchhiker reminded me that if this was the '70s, this stretch of the PCH would have been inundated by those thumbing a ride south to LA. Once rolling, my biggest fear is that some unaware driver coming out of a driveway or side street might not see the Challenger coming its way.

Because of the hand-built nature of

the Concept, even though it is based on the current LX platform, its suspension is still being sorted out. It was funny that if any attribute of the concept is like the original, it's the concept's underpinnings, in which the Concept bottomed out in exactly the same places as it did on the original Hemi Challenger which was driven earlier over the same stretch of pavement. But I was easily able to imagine, having driven all the LX platform SRT variants, how this seductive shape will drive with a fully sorted out suspension underneath; actually it was a very easy stretch of my imagination.

The steering, while heavy, had a production-ready feel given the production SRT wheel/tire combination installed. While we were not given the

opportunity to run it hard through the gears, suffice to say that even with the extra weight typical of any concept car, the Challenger felt mighty quick and 0-60 sprints in under 5 seconds, typical of a Magnum or Charger SRT8, would be within easy reach, using just two of the car's six forward ratios.

Being 5-foot-8, I felt that I was sitting lower than I'd have liked. The Concept's seats lack the full range of adjustability expected in a contemporary production car, yet once driving I felt very comfortable behind the wheel. Within just a few miles I stopped thinking that I was driving a one-of-a-kind concept and felt at ease behind the wheel.

Driving any concept is a treat, one of life's pleasures that any true auto enthusiast would savor and the Challenger is no exception. But having driven more than two dozen concepts over the last 10 years I can safely say that this one is different...I felt emotionally and spiritually connected with the car the second I put my right foot to its gloriously detailed aluminum accelerator pedal. For someone who came of age just as the musclecar era ended, the thought that I was driving a "brand new" Dodge Challenger, one that paid proper homage to one of the legends of that very special time, was a thrill like no other.

It's a singular, American experience, a big V-8 stuffed in a chassis normally home to a more pedestrian engine. The Challenger Concept fits the traditional definition of a musclecar, even if over the years it's put on a few pounds and grown a bit in every dimension (haven't we all done that since 1974?). And while many manufacturers around the world have tried their best to duplicate the recipe, none have quite mixed the ingredients like Mike and Alan have with the reborn Challenger. All the elements, with just a few minor criticisms aside, are present in perfect harmony. And yes Mom, it has a Hemi, a glorious, fire breathing Hemi!

CHALLENGER OWNERS SPEAK UP

If the readers of *Musclecar Enthusiast* are to be believed, Dodge has a home run on its hands. Page upon page of reader mail tells us that the designers in Auburn Hills (and here on the West Coast), have perfectly captured the essence of the iconic 1970-1974 Challenger, and mastered the difficult task of updating

The Challenger Concept practically caused a 6:30 a.m. riot at the Derelict Donuts in Huntington Beach, one of the best-known car culture gatherings in Southern California.

it for the 21st century. But because our magazine is called *Musclecar Enthusiast*, we took the opportunity to assemble owners of eight original Challengers, dyed-in-the-wool enthusiasts (male and female) who know the real deal, and are the most qualified to pass judgment on how squarely Dodge has hit the bull's eye. If their comments are any indication, they too agree that the reborn Challenger is sure to score big when it hits your local Dodge showroom in 2008.

We invited the dozen vintage Challenger owners to join us at Mazda Laguna Seca Raceway, south of San Francisco, for an impromptu photo session. Each had the opportunity to park his or her Challenger next to its modern day counterpart and we quizzed them as to their impressions.

Jeff and Denise Lederman have what some believe to be one of the finest Challengers on the planet, an aqua 1970 Dodge Hemi Challenger R/T 4-speed, and after seeing the Concept in the flesh, here's what Jeff had to say: "Dodge really nailed the design from



a retro perspective, and how much it looked just as it was intended to look: like a modern version of a classic car. It has the elements of an original Challenger which I like so much: Low and wide, with side body lines giving it a hunched over, ready-to-spring look. Also, that it appears to be designed to ensure that it has an engine to match its looks."

Much of Jeff's thoughts were echoed

by Buzz Graves, a Mopar collector of some reputation as he currently has six, including the Go-Mango (orange) 1970 Hemi Challenger R/T that made the trip south from Laguna Seca to Paso Robles. "Historically and in a contemporary perspective, the new Challenger is awesome," he said. "It's the most accurate representation to an original car of any retro car. The new





Challengers take on Cannery Row in Monterey.



The \$3 million pit stop. We admit to sweaty palms driving the one-off Concept.

Mustang is close to its '67 thoroughbred, but the Challenger Concept captures so much more of its original heritage. The hood scoops, interior, body lines, stance and huge Hemi scream 'I'm still the king of the road.' The interior is a work of art where the dash is retro down to the Challenger nameplate on the passenger side. The Rallye hood is just like the '70s R/T version but better in that its scoops are functional while the front end with the dual headlights, parking lights and grille represent the '70 R/T faithfully."

Randy Reddig, who, with Coral Goodspeed, brought their fully optioned Sub-lime 1970 Challenger R/T convertible, offered up his comments from a different perspective. "My first impressions when it was a picture in a magazine was, 'Nice, too bad it'll never

happen.' Then I saw it in person in Las Vegas at the Mopars at the Strip show and thought 'It looks better in person, but I wish I could get a better look, there are too many people and too much rope in the way to actually see.' Then I heard about this reunion and while I had reservations about coming I must say I'm glad I did, as on closer inspection I think the concept does a great job of honoring the past while adding a modern touch to the Challenger. And while it could have been truer to the original I'm certain that DaimlerChrysler isn't looking to reproduce a 35-year old design; they have a concept that can be built using an existing chassis/platform. The design team needs to be congratulated for a remarkable effort."

At 20 years of age, Greg Bridges

was the youngest Challenger owner in attendance (the original Challenger was out of production 12 years before he was even born) and brought the youngest Challenger to Laguna Seca, a Go-Mango 1973 Pro-streeter built together with his dad. If DaimlerChrysler is to be successful with a reincarnated Challenger, it's with Greg's demographic that the car needs to make an immediate impact.

"Personally my first impressions were just how well the new car depicted the original Challenger; the similarities were both subtle yet in your face at the same time. The strongest element of the new Challenger is its ability to appeal to both younger and older enthusiasts along with the fact that it may be possible to again walk into a Dodge dealership and buy that HEMI Challenger you've always wanted."

PRODUCTION-READY

Unlike most factory-built concepts, the Challenger Concept, which premiered to universal acclaim at this year's North American (Detroit) International Auto Show, used as its starting point Chrysler's highly-regarded LX platform (300C, Magnum and Charger). If you want to think about it, designers Michael Castiglione and Alan Barrington worked from the cowl and A-pillar and incorporated so many classic Challenger design cues into this

thoroughly modern update. While the new car is substantially larger than the original in every dimension (it's actually much closer in size to the 1968-1970 Charger), and there's not a line on the car that exactly matches the original, at first glance, even your mother will know it's a Challenger.

Dodge used the occasion of the NASACR Pepsi 400 race on July 1 at Daytona to officially announce the return of the Challenger. Chrysler Group President and CEO Tom LaSorda said the Challenger will debut as a 2008 model in calendar-year 2008, which implies an introduction early in the year. "We haven't seen this kind of spontaneous, passionate response to a car since we unveiled the Dodge Viper concept in 1989," LaSorda said.

Beyond the introduction date, Dodge didn't reveal any production details about the new Challenger, so much is still open to speculation. The final shape of the car is no doubt locked in.

More recent speculations from insiders seem to indicate that the first year's production will be around 30,000 units which would indicate a single, 5.7-liter Hemi-powered model. As a hedge against rising gas prices we still expect the engine line-up to include a V-6, and possibly an enlarged 6.3-liter (392ci, a magic number in Mopar lore) Hemi that is coming on steam as a Mopar crate motor option and is expected to be the basis of the next generation SRT V-8. This engine is expected to deliver 500 horsepower on 91-octane and should keep the Dodge Boys' Challenger SRT8 (possibly to be called a T/A, similar to the Super Bee package available on the 2007 Charger) competitive with Ford's Shelby Cobra GT500.

There are two questions that still surround the Challenger; production capacity and whether it's feasible to offer a 6-speed option (the Challenger Concept is hooked up to the Viper's robust 6-speed manual). On the capacity front, all LX

cars come from the old AMC plant in Brampton, Ontario and at press time, that plant is running flat out, trying to keep up with demand for the still hot-selling 300C, Magnum and Charger.

Digging behind the scenes, *Musclecar Enthusiast* has been able to learn that Chrysler Group product planners are giving serious consideration of making the investment in flexible plant tooling to upgrade a current production facility, enabling it to build more than one platform simultaneously in the same plants. Some rumors have swirled around the Windsor, Ontario, minivan plant. If Windsor goes flexible in the next 18 months, it would give Chrysler the needed capacity to build however many Challengers the market could absorb.

Concerning the 6-speed option, the issue is far from clear. While enthusiasts are clamoring for a stick shift option, the only suitable gearbox for the high horsepower applications is the Viper's robust (and costly) 6-speed. What really determines if a 6-speed will see production is how much it will cost to get the Hemi/6-speed version certified. Because the transmission is a structural element of the car, 6-speed Challengers would need to be crash tested, adding both delay and cost to the development program. If we were to speculate, we feel that the 6-speed option will come but not at introduction; look for it in 2009 when the expected SRT8 arrives and the option can be added to the high volume 5.7-liter version at the same time. If this turns out to be the case, the 6-speed could be added to the 300C/Magnum/Charger LX stable mates for 2009 as well.

What to make of all this? Expect to see a Challenger 3.5-liter V6 and a 5.7-liter Hemi (possibly to be called the R/T), both mated to an AutoStick 5-speed gearbox at introduction with the 6.3-liter SRT V-8 to follow 12 months later, following the same basic template used for SRT versions of the 300C/Magnum/Charger. The 6-speed, if it is to come, should arrive at the same time. The price for the V-6 and Hemi will probably be about \$3,000 more than comparable V-6 and 4.6-liter Mustangs given the Challenger's larger size (with a real back seat) and its higher overall level of content, especially the expensive independent rear suspension.

The Challenger is surely one of the most anticipated new cars to come out of Chrysler in recent memory. Wherever we drove the Challenger, in San Francisco, down the PCH, in Santa Monica, the classic Bob's Big Boy in Burbank or Saturday morning Southern California cruises, the Challenger was an unqualified hit. In fact, at our last two stops, at the legendary Derelict Donuts in Huntington Beach or the exotic car infested gathering at Crystal Cove in Newport Beach, the Challenger was the center of attraction causing near riots, with the only real questions being "when" and "how much?" We now know the "when" part; the rest is just gravy.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Thanks to all of the vintage Challenger owners who participated in the feature and to the management of Mazda Laguna Seca Raceway for graciously allowing us to shoot all the Challengers, especially the two T/A models, in their native habitat. ■

