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**HOT ROD** WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

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# RST CHARGER

## If Not for This Car, Who Knows What Bo and Luke Would Have Driven or Painted Confederate Flags On

By Stephen Kim

Photography: Wes Allison

The proportions are a bit odd, the abbreviated windshield and roll hoops/headrests look gimmicky, and the vertical bumpers are anything but functional. However, to vintage-car historians, those quirks—reminiscent of the flamboyant Motorama machines of the '50s and '60s—are all part of the charm of the funky '64 Dodge Charger. Says owner Joe Bortz, "It's not an aesthetically sleek car, but it's bold, masculine, and looks like it's on testosterone."

At first, the notion of a '64 Charger sounds as silly as a '62 Mustang or a '65 Camaro, and that's because it shouldn't even exist. However, Bortz's Charger is a genuine '64 based on a hardtop two-door Dodge Polara that was sliced and diced into what you see here. Joe says this factory show car is the first car ever to wear the Charger badge. Standard Chrysler protocol called for its destruction after touring the show circuit, but this one-off managed to escape into the hands of the public. "The car was originally owned by Paul Stearn, who ran a Chrysler dealer in Hershey, Pennsylvania, and happened to be a very big collector, too" says Joe. "In those days, big-volume dealers were very powerful since the OEs wanted to keep them happy. Stearn's son then inherited the car and sold it to another dealer, who I worked on for about 12 years before he finally agreed to sell it."

While the car was sheltered most of its life, it still required a lot of work to return it to its original form. "The car had never been abused or exposed to the elements, but the worst part was the customization one of the previous owners performed. The headlights were frenched, and the rear trim was removed, which really changed the look of the car. Fortunately, we found some very detailed photos of the car from Chrysler's archives and we were able to reproduce the original parts to perfection. Every single part was taken off and reconditioned. It was a very arduous process that took about five years to complete," he says.

One area of Bortz's restoration that deviates from the formula of originality, and thankfully so, is under the massive, scooped hood. The show car's badges falsely advertised 426 inches of Hemi power on its fenders, though it was actually fitted with a 383 Wedge motor. Shameful, yes, but numerous teething issues with the early Hemi engine program left Chrysler engineers with no other option, and besides, the few Hemi blocks on hand during the time of the car's initial buildup were needed for NASCAR racers. On a mission to atone for Ma Mopar's transgression with Wedge, Joe approached ace Hemi-builder Arruzza High Performance (Trinity, North Carolina) with an absurd request: Don't just build any plain old 426, build one with all-original '64 parts. From nothing more than a twinkle in Joe's eye, John Arruzza made the impossible happen. Says John, "You could still find stuff like this floating around 15 years ago, but let me



# THE VERY FIRST CHARGER



tell you, you can't anymore. It wasn't easy, but somehow it all miraculously came together."

Having built hundreds of Hemis over the years, John zealously flipped through his thick Rolodex and started hunting down parts. "It was just a lot of luck and a lot of connections. I was actually surprised we found all the pieces we needed," he says. "Chrysler engineers were in a real grind to debut the Hemi in the '64 Daytona 500. In fact, the three motors they sent to Richard Petty were cast only a week before the race. The very first blocks were hand-bored and had lots of problems because the cylinder walls were too thin. I found the 10th Hemi block ever cast, which is dated 10/63 and predates all blocks used in Daytona 500 that year. Sure enough, the walls were very thin, so I had to sleeve two of them." Likewise, all components—

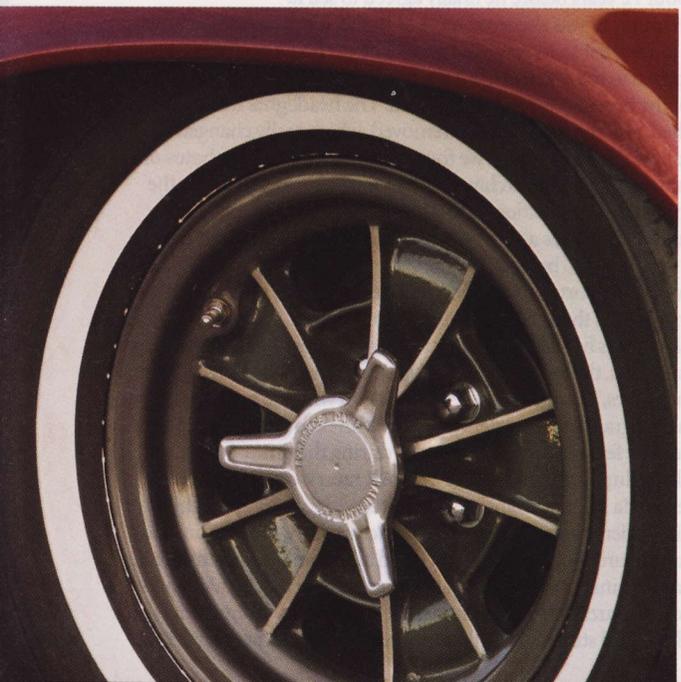
from the heads to the carb, to the intake manifold, to the exhaust, to the rocker arms, to the valve covers, to the damper, to the spark plug tubes—are real N.O.S. '64 Hemi and crank out an estimated 600 hp. There's definitely something impractical but cool about sacrificing reliability in the name of fastidious detail to nostalgic originality.

By the time the '65 Charger II concept rolled around, the car evolved into a much sleeker and tidier package bearing no resemblance to the '64 show car and eventually reached production relatively unchanged as the '66. Unless you're an avid car guy, there's no way you'd call the '64 Charger a sweet-looking machine and not be lying, but after a 30-year hiatus, the Hemi's back, and an all-new Charger is just around the corner. If not for this car, none of that would be possible. And my, oh my, what a travesty that would be. **HRM**

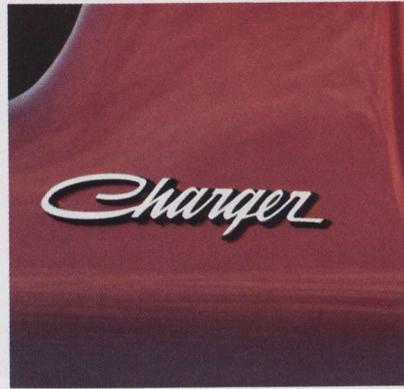
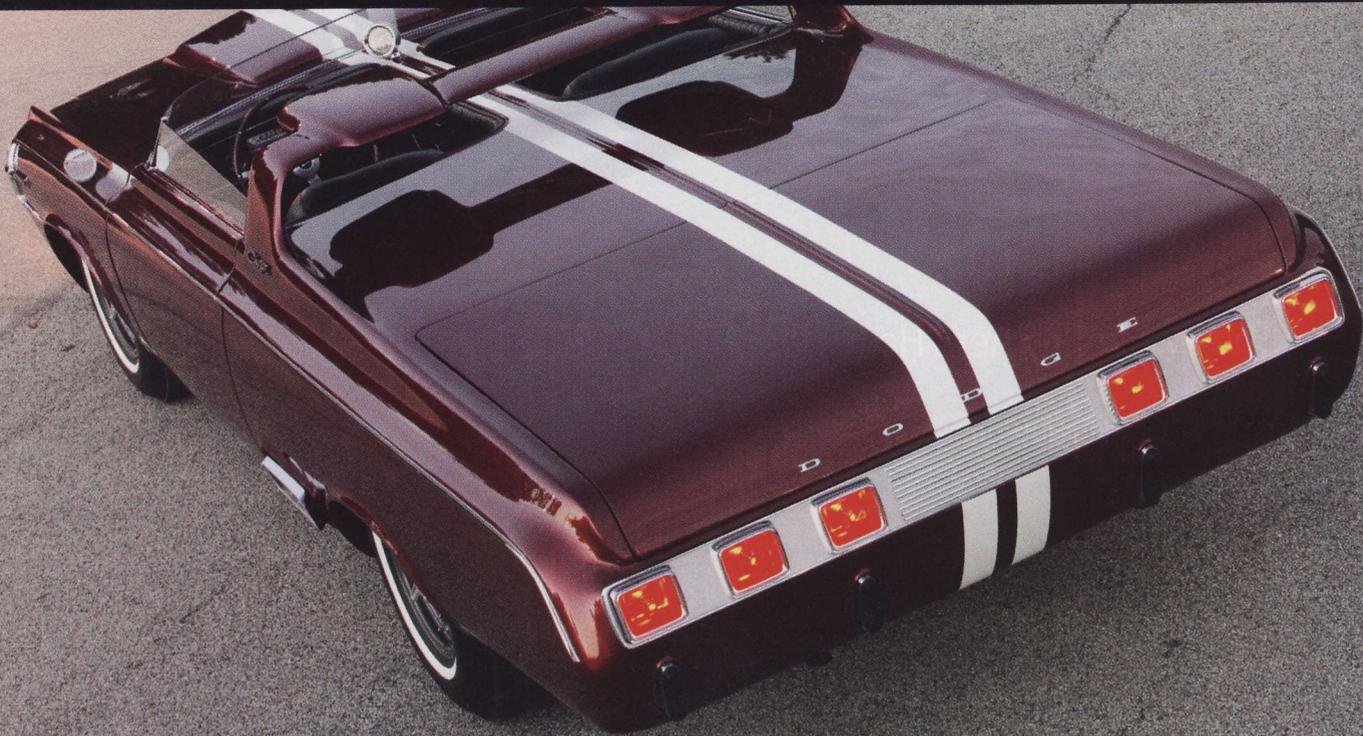


"The Hemi is so true-blue '64 it's unbelievable. It was really neat to put it together, but if someone came to me and wanted to do this again, I doubt we could find all the parts and repeat it."

—John Arruzza



> **Top:** A Callies crank, Manley steel rods, and custom 9.6:1 Ross pistons round out the Hemi's rotating assembly, and the cam is relatively mild with 296 degrees advertised duration and 0.535-inch lift. The Holley carb and magnesium intake are original '64 NASCAR-spec parts. > **Middle:** The rollbar doubles as a headrest, and the driver actually looks over the front windshield. Obviously, it's more for show than practicality, but all the running gear functions. > **Bottom:** The Charger rolls on its original one-off magnesium wheels wrapped in white-wall tires.



> **Top:** There's an electric trunk release and no rearview mirror or door handles to clutter the Charger's overall appearance. > **Above left:** Fitted with two exhaust systems, gases exit through the rear under normal use, but flipping a switch bypasses the mufflers and routes fumes to these vents in front of the rear tires. > **Above middle:** The tach mounts to the center spine that runs the length of the interior. > **Above right:** This is literally where the legendary Charger nameplate was affixed for the first time.

