

# TOP MUSCLE

The Rarest Cars  
from America's  
Fastest Decade



PHOTOGRAPHY BY RANDY LEFFINGWELL

DARWIN HOLMSTROM











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**DARWIN HOLSTROM** PHOTOGRAPHY BY RANDY LEFFINGWELL





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# FOREWORD

Welcome to a sample of the Brothers Collection.

This project evolved out of my friendship with photographer extraordinaire Randy Leffingwell and the two brothers who own the cars featured in this book. The brothers probably own the most comprehensive collection of muscle cars in the world, and we selected what I think is a pretty nice cross-section of them to feature for *Top Muscle*. This is a great way to share some of the rarest cars in the world and to give people a chance to enjoy Randy's amazing photography.

I first learned of Randy years ago when he wrote and photographed a book called *American Muscle*, which featured the amazing cars of Otis Chandler. After that I actually met him when he was in my town photographing antique tractors. A book on American barns and a book on Porsche followed. I remember Randy shooting pics of my 1997 911 Porsche Turbo while sitting in a tiny chair attached to the trailer hitch of his car. The chair was about 8 inches off the ground, and he drove all around on country roads with me following behind as Randy shot rolls of film while in that tiny chair. Randy is a dedicated photographer and the first guy I thought of when it was time to share some of this amazing collection in print.

I first met the brothers a few years ago when I stored a 1969 Pontiac Trans Am convertible they had just purchased from the original owner in San Francisco. It was kind of all downhill from there. If you are a car guy, you are a car guy, and the brothers love cars. They don't just have a handful of muscle cars to showcase—we are talking about several *hundred* cars in the collection. Ever seen a 1969 Pontiac Trans Am convertible? The Brothers own four. Or how about eight Hemi Cuda or Challenger converts? They even have a pair of 1957 factory supercharged Ford Rancheros. They are semi-private people who have allowed me to weasel my way into their lives; hopefully I haven't made them regret that they ever met me. They feel it's important to share these cars, though, and not just keep them hidden away forever as happens to some cars when they go into collections. There are plans for a semi-public museum in the future, but in the meantime we get to see some of their cars in books, at shows, online, and elsewhere. Please enjoy the Brothers Collection, as well as the amazing photography of Randy Leffingwell.

Charley Lillard





PART I:

# GENERAL MOTORS





The classic muscle car era began when John Z. DeLorean, who was in charge of General Motors' Pontiac division at the time, and his band of outlaw engineers bolted Pontiac division's hottest engine into a midsized chassis—disobeying orders from the top of GM's food chain—and created something no sane person would ever contemplate: the muscle car. That the muscle car should be a product of General Motors, a company that has earned the derogatory nickname “General Mothers” for the nanny-state-like mentality it often exhibits toward the driving public, could only have happened because of loose cannons like DeLorean. And it can never happen again, because GM instituted a strict pogrom designed to weed out creative types from its top management and replace them with graduates from business programs, people who had more lust for spreadsheets than for performance cars.

Fortunately, General Motors hadn't yet perfected its process for snuffing out excitement and creativity in the fall of 1963, when DeLorean unleashed the Pontiac GTO on the world. Since then, generations of American auto enthusiasts have celebrated DeLorean's creative interpretation of the rules, but the suits running General Motors weren't celebrating—they had serious problems. In the early 1960s, GM found itself under assault on two fronts. First, the Automobile Manufacturers Association (AMA) still enforced a strict ban on its members participating in racing. This ban proved to be symbolic, since the AMA had no teeth with which to enforce it, and both Ford and Chrysler openly defied the ban whenever it suited their corporate purposes, but not GM.

That was because of reason number two: The federal government was threatening to break up GM because the company's overall share of the auto market was so large that it was on the verge of becoming an illegal monopoly, according to the antitrust laws of the day. This was no idle threat; the U.S. government had broken up Standard Oil a half century earlier for the very same reason. Thus, GM obeyed the AMA ban not because of some sort of devotion to good citizenship but rather because the company had nothing to gain from the publicity that racing attracted.

Either way, GM was not amused by DeLorean's GTO, so Pontiac had to market the car through the back door, offering the GTO as an option package on the Pontiac Tempest. What the cadavers occupying the top floors of GM's corporate headquarters failed to grasp, the motoring public bought in droves. Pontiac had kicked off the classic muscle car era with the GTO and saw the era through to its bitter end, when the division produced the last Super Duty 455 Firebird in 1974. It was a tumultuous decade, one that almost saw the death of the American performance car, but the cars GM reluctantly produced during that period are among the most beloved American automobiles ever built.

# 1970 BUICK GSX STAGE 1



Buick dabbled with muscle cars from the very birth of the genre, though the division's focus was on more upscale models like the Riviera throughout most of the classic muscle car era. The division's Gran Sport was a strong performer, but its sedate styling never really tickled the fun buttons of the baby-boom generation.



#### SPECIFICATIONS:

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Number built:	<b>678 (491 Saturn Yellow, 187 Apollo White)</b>
Number built with Stage 1 engines and four-speed transmissions:	<b>118</b>
Horsepower:	<b>350 (standard 455), 360 (Stage 1)</b>
Torque:	<b>510 lb-ft at 2,800 rpm</b>

Older generations, however, remembered a time when Buick had been General Motors' performance division; Buick's fire-breathing straight eight was one of the hottest engines available before the advent of World War II.

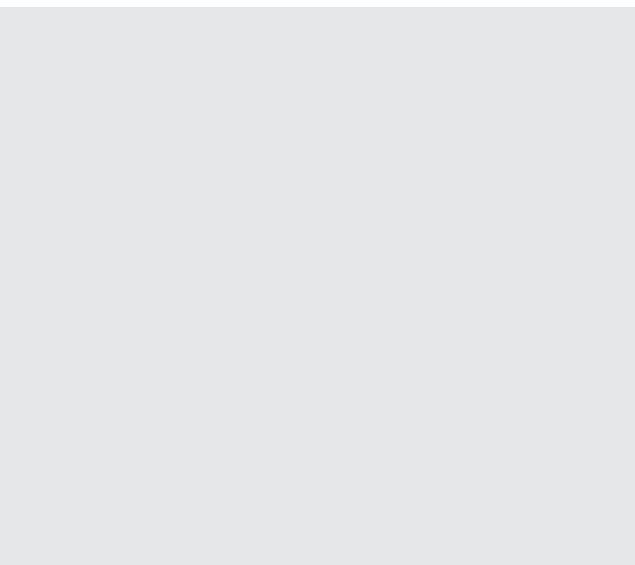
By the time the muscle car era began in earnest, Buicks were generally considered conveyances for conservative, well-to-do older buyers, and for the most part even the division's muscle cars catered more to that crowd than to the baby-boom generation buying them from Buick's competitors. There was one exception, however: the GSX. Somehow, one of the wildest cars of the classic muscle car era slipped past the tyrannical gatekeepers of the status quo who ran Buick at the time. Officially dubbed



the A9, a \$1,195.87 option for Buick's Gran Sport, the GSX added all the flash and style that Buick's top brass had avoided throughout the 1960s, perhaps because they worried that such things as spoilers, hood scoops, and dramatic stripes might cause young people to fornicate, or perhaps even dance. If a buyer wanted serious performance to go with that flash, he or she ordered the \$113.75 A1 performance package, more popularly known as the Stage 1 option.

The 1970 GSX in Stage 1 tune really should have been the car that restored Buick's performance reputation, though that is not immediately apparent from reading the spec sheet. In standard tune, the GSX produced an advertised 350 horsepower. In addition to nifty accessories such as a hood-mounted tachometer, power front disc brakes, 3.42:1 ratio positive-traction rear end, special front stabilizer bar, heavy-duty front and rear shocks, and heavy-duty rear anti-roll bar, the \$115 Stage 1 package netted the buyer an additional 10 horsepower.

On paper, at least.







In reality, the hot-rodding tricks employed in the Stage 1 engine—hotter cams, bigger valves, revised carburetor jetting, stiffer valve springs—were far too numerous to net just 10 extra ponies. In its September 2010 issue, *Muscle Car Review* quoted former Buick engineer Denny Manner as saying actual horsepower was 372 horsepower at 5,200 rpm. The official rating—360 horsepower at 4,600 rpm—was correct, at least at 4,600 rpm. Buick chose to use the output at 4,600 rpm rather than the true output achieved at 5,200 rpm because rating the 3,603-pound car at 360 horsepower made it eligible for an NHRA drag racing class that allowed only one horsepower for every 10 pounds of curb weight. Such is racing.

Horsepower is all well and good, but what any muscle car fan capable of doing basic math really cares about is torque. And when it came to torque—the twisting force that actually makes a car get up and go—the GSX's 455-cubic-inch engine put out a massive 510 lb-ft of the stuff at a mere 2,800 rpm, which means it had more grunt than any other engine ever mounted in a muscle car. In fact, this was the highest torque rating of any American V-8 engine ever built. Until the advent of the 2003 redesign of the V-10 Dodge Viper, it was the highest torque rating of any American passenger car engine ever built. According to the late astrophysicist and mad muscle car groupie Carl Sagan, 510 lb-ft is enough torque to measurably alter the Earth's rotation. While the spec sheet listed the Stage 1 as having an anemic 360 horsepower, the actual output combined with a butt-load of torque to make the Stage 1 GSX the quickest muscle car that *Motor Trend* ever tested. The magazine pushed the big Buick through the quarter-mile traps in 13.38 seconds—on bias-ply tires.

Unlike most of its muscle car brethren, the GSX had enough amenities and creature comforts to warrant the Buick badge. This was no stripped-down street racer; it was one of the most well-rounded performance cars of the era. It could even handle a curve. Buick's 455-cubic-inch engine weighed 150 pounds less than the 455s produced by Pontiac and Oldsmobile, and also the 454-cubic-inch powerplant used by Chevrolet, making the Buick by far the most balanced of all General Motors muscle cars.

Robert A. Kee purchased this example from Marquardt Buick in Barrington, Illinois, on April 18, 1970. In addition to all the standard goodies that came with an A1-equipped A9 GSX, this car also featured an M20 four-speed transmission, making it one of only 118 Stage 1 GSXs with four-speeds, C5 fast variable ratio power steering (\$121.12), and a Sonomatic Radio (\$69.51).

