

Living in the Lime Light

The rotisserie restoration of a Hemi-powered 1970 Road Runner fulfills the universal dream

By Mark J. McCourt

Photography by Don Spiro

Sometimes all it takes is one childhood experience to set a tone for life: "In 1970, I was eight years old, and my dad, who worked for a Chrysler Plymouth dealer, drove a brand new Superbird home for the night. That was the start of it for me." So began a passion for Rob Lelakowski that has culminated in the ten-year, nut-and-bolt rotisserie restoration of the Hemi-powered Lime Light Green Road Runner on these pages. From its unusual beginning to its triumphant completion, this Plymouth is the stuff that dreams are made of.

Plymouth's "Rapid Transit System" was having a banner year in 1970 when Rob got his first taste of Mopar power.

The \$3,034 Road Runner hardtop upon which the Superbird was based received some notable upgrades that year, including a handsome new grille, revised Rallye instrument cluster, decorative side scoop and a fresh tail-lamp treatment, but the car's basic styling was unchanged from its introduction in 1968. A new convertible variant was available for 1970, and an expanded option sheet allowed buyers to add luxury features that took the Road Runner well beyond its original mission—cheap speed.

In 1985, at age 22, Rob learned about our feature car in an odd way. "I was at a self-serve car wash hosing my 1966 Belvedere off, and a guy walked up to me and asked me if my car had a Hemi in it. I said No, it was a 440. Then he asked if I wanted to buy one—a 1970 Road Runner, an original Hemi car." Rob was incredulous, and wondered if the man was putting him on—"I walked over to his van to get his phone number, and his license plate frame read, 'My other car is a '70 Hemi Road Runner!'" Rob looked at the car the next day, and after confirming the green Road Runner was genuine, he took the plunge for \$4,700.

"It was pretty much complete and rolling when I got it," he recalls. "The engine and transmission were out, and the Hemi was in pieces—it was missing its original carburetors and radiator." Because Rob didn't yet have indoor storage, the car sat under a cover for the next eight years while he built his 32 x 80-foot workshop. "I had been collecting Mopar pieces and parts through the years, and I had that Road Runner on a pedestal for a while—I was almost intimidated by it because I'd never worked on a Hemi before, and I wanted the car to be perfect." In 1993, he rolled up his sleeves and dove in.



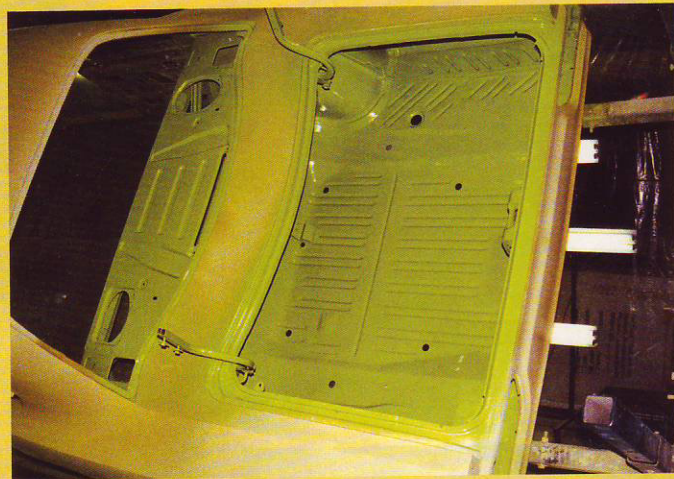


The Road Runner was mounted on a rotisserie after being plastic media blasted, then a thin coat of body filler was applied to level uneven areas





Rotisserie made accessing roof easy while block sanding between coats of DuPont primer



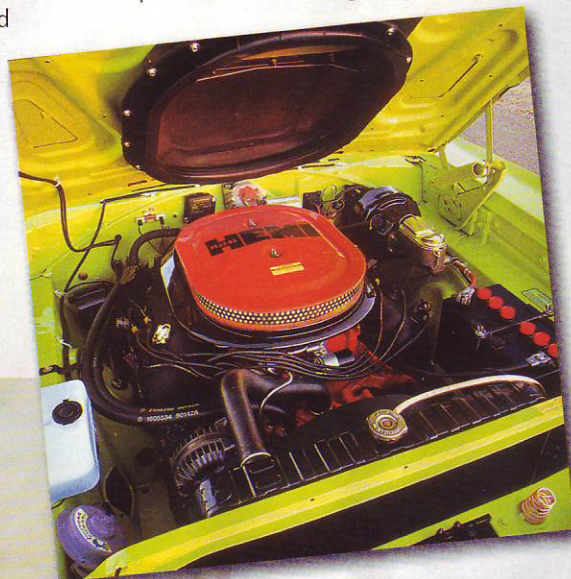
Rob sprayed the rear package shelf and trunk, which received a replacement salvaged B-body floor, with DuPont Lime Light Green

"The original owner pulled the Hemi sometime around 1974 to use it in a boat; he then installed a 383, and his daughter drove the car for years. The current Hemi was a standard bore replacement block," Rob explains. He took the replacement engine to Maurer's Performance in Tempe, Arizona, where Dennis Maurer bored the block .020 to remove a bit of tapering, ground the crankshaft .010/.010, decked the block, surfaced the cylinder head and gave it a three-angle valve cut. Rob located a set of NOS Mopar cast-aluminum pistons in the proper size and an NOS rod to replace one that was determined faulty after magnafluxing. Once the machining was done, he fitted the pistons with Speed-Pro Plasma-Moly rings. New Mopar Performance hydraulic lifters were installed, as was a reproduction Hemi camshaft with 284/284 duration, and stock valves.

A Hemi radiator was located in Arizona, and correct Carter AFB model 4742 and 4745 carburetors were found through an ad in *Hemmings*. And in his attempt to make everything appear original, he sent the chromed pulleys out to have their finish stripped before painting them black.

With the engine out of the way, he turned his attention to the Hemi four-speed transmission. Because he had never rebuilt a four-speed before, Rob enlisted help from his father Bob and from the 1970 service manual. The model A833 18-spline heavy-duty unit required a rebuild kit from a local transmission shop, and when it was complete, he duplicated the paint dots that had been applied in the factory by referring to comprehensive photos he'd taken at the start of the restoration. "The Dana [rear axle] was fine," he says. "I just

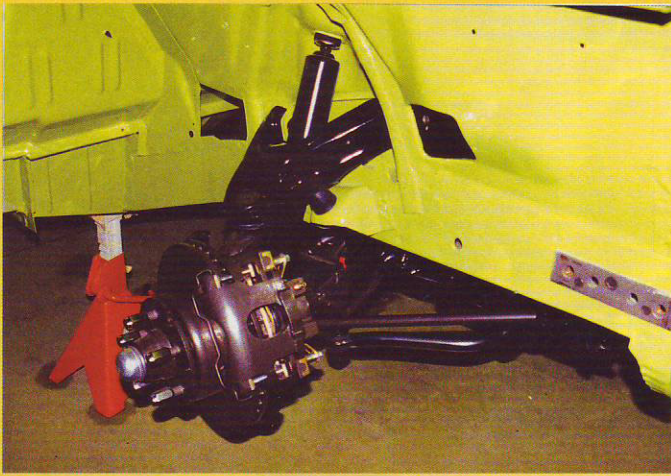
installed new axle bearings and seals, and completely rebuilt the suspension." Instead of simply cleaning and repainting suspension parts, only to have them chip and rust with time, Rob chose to have each part powdercoated for durability. Arizona Powder Coat in Phoenix disassembled parts such as the rear leaf springs before sandblasting and powdercoating each component. "I chose to have pieces that were originally left in



The Hemi under this Road Runner's hood makes it one of only 59 four-speed hardtops so equipped



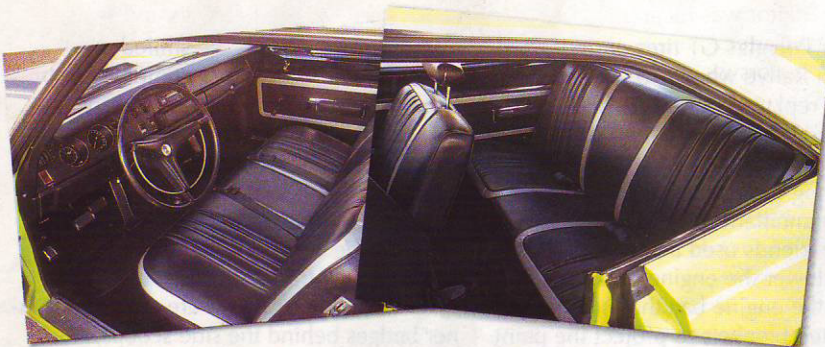
The stuff dreams are made of; after 18 years, Rob's Lime Light Green Road Runner was better than new



Suspension and brake components were powdercoated in their correct colors for durability; calipers, rotors and pads were new



To prevent any undercarriage scratches, jackstands were heavily padded; powdercoated rear axle was test-fitted before installation



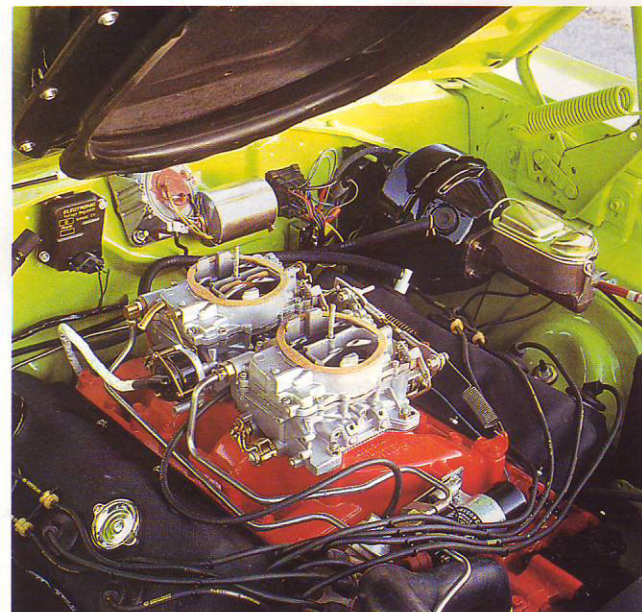
Salvage front bench replaced non-original buckets when stock vinyl Legendary Interiors kit was installed

raw metal done in an oxidized color for a natural look," Rob explains. "It only cost \$25 to have the entire K-frame blasted clean and powdercoated black—why would anyone do all that cleaning, prepping and painting when powdercoating is so durable and inexpensive?" he asks with a smile.

Turning his attention to the Road Runner's body, which he had disassembled in his shop, Rob flat-bedded it to a plastic media blaster in Glendale, Arizona, where the paint was stripped from top to bottom. "I was really pleased with how clean and solid the car was," he recalls. Paint and body specialist Brad Saari agreed to do the bodywork in Rob's shop, and with the car mounted on a rotisserie, Brad cut out the center portion of the trunk floor, which had rusted due to the B-body's typically leaky rear window. "I was going to use the two-piece reproduction trunk floor that was available at the time, but Brad didn't like how it would look and encouraged me to find an original. We cut one from a rust-free Belvedere," Rob says. Brad installed the floor with his MIG welder, and took advantage of the rotisserie to smooth the upper body panels and to remove the

minor dents in the undercarriage that were the result of years of floor jack use. The men then took off all the front sheet metal and the functioning Air Grabber-equipped hood, the doors and trunklid before Rob set up a paint booth in his shop with hanging plastic sheeting and two exhaust fans.

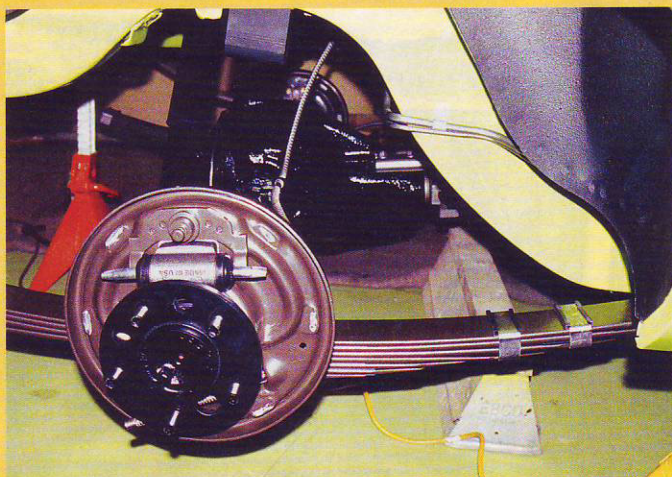
Brad sprayed the car with between 20 and 30 coats of DuPont Variprime self-etching primer and PPG K200 acrylic urethane primer, block sanding between coats to make sure that the finish was perfectly smooth. Rob then used his Curtis 80-gallon two-stage air compressor and Geo HVLP gun to paint the Road Runner with single-stage DuPont ChromaOne acrylic urethane in the original Lime Light Green. "I painted in stages as Brad recommended," he remembers; "I did the undercarriage, then the roof and quarters, the door jambs, engine bay and trunk—I painted the doors, the hood and the trunklid off the car, which allowed me to concentrate on one panel at a time." Rob chose not to sand between the five coats of paint that he applied, instead finishing with 600-, 1000- and 2000-grade paper after the last coat had dried. "That single-stage paint gets so



Proper twin Carter AFB carburetors were purchased through Hemmings and rebuilt

hard," he remarked—"I waited too long to color-sand it, and I thought I'd have to respray, but I worked hard with a wool pad and 3M Perfect-It compound, and I was happy with the results." He also chose to undercoat only the wheel tubs: "One thing I didn't do was duplicate the 'factory slop'—the runs in the paint, the overspray. A lot of guys duplicate that, but I didn't elect to go that route. The car was undercoated from the factory, but it often fell into that 'factory slop' category, so I left it green."

When the paint was finished, Rob transferred the Road Runner to jackstands in order to reinstall the powdercoated suspension components, the rear axle, the brake lines and the new power front disc/rear drum brake components. He then installed the correct F60-15



Rob chose not to duplicate the “factory slop,” only undercoating the wheel tubs; each individual spring leaf was powdercoated



Ready for museum display, the rebuilt 426 Hemi and 18-spline four-speed sat on Rob's homemade engine stand before installation



Replacement trunk mat was inexpensive, but five Goodyear Polyglas GT bias-ply tires weren't



Road Runner side nameplates were the only replacement badges that had to be bought



Correct replacement bench seat door panel accented with reused original Road Runner decal

Goodyear Polyglas GT tires on repainted 15x7-inch Rallye wheels to get the car rolling. A replacement Mopar gas tank that he had picked up in the late 1980s took the place of the dented original. After bolting the exhaust manifolds and the major ancillaries to the Hemi, Rob and three friends used a cherry picker to carefully lower the engine and transmission into the engine bay that he'd lined with quilted blankets to protect the paint.

Rob was surprised to learn that the buckets that were in the Road Runner when he took ownership weren't original. “The car had a proper bucket seat interior, including the door panels, which specifically match the seats,” he noted. “When I pulled up the carpeting, the bucket seat mounts were obviously drilled in the wrong spots.” He filled the holes and got a replacement bench seat from a junkyard 1970 Belvedere coupe. Rob purchased an interior kit from Legendary Interiors that included seat covers, door panels, carpeting and the headliner. Chuck Booth and Curtis Jenkins installed it in his shop. “I re-used the original rear seat, the seatbelts, window regulators and all the glass, and had the gauges, the AM/8-track radio and heater refurbished.... I used everything I could possibly restore. The dashboard slowed me down the most because I just couldn't get enthusiastic about doing it,” he recalls. When Rob finally reinstalled the dashboard, he re-used the original wiring harness from the firewall back, as he'd only had to replace the engine-forward section. One interior item that he didn't restore was the original Road Runner bird decal from the passenger side door panel. “I taped over it and cut it off the old panel to reuse it on the new one—I thought I would destroy it, but it worked,

and it looks so good,” he smiled.

When the interior was complete, Rob began work on the car's trim. He spent a good deal of time buffing the plastic instrument panel cover, taillamps and side marker lenses with two-stage Wenol polish, which brought them back to new condition, and he also polished the stainless steel window trim and wheel trim rings. “The only new emblems are the Road Runner badges behind the side scoops,” Rob recalls; “I buffed the other emblems, and I repainted the black centers in the rear panel lettering. The bumpers were another issue.... I wanted the chrome plating to be of show car quality, but the first job wasn't good enough. I could see waves in the chrome and some handling scratches. I took another set of bumpers to another chroming shop, and they didn't turn out right either—I couldn't believe it. So I brought all four bumpers to Concours Chrome in Phoenix, and they took the two worst ones and rechromed them perfectly for \$200 each—they're absolutely beautiful and straight as an arrow.”

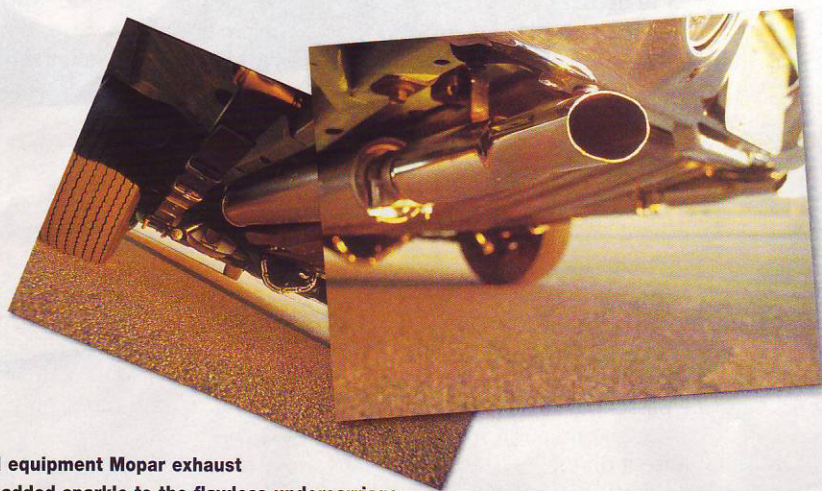
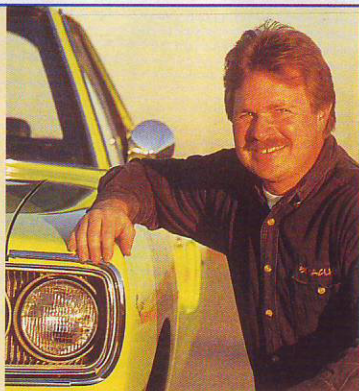
Because his Road Runner had worn the optional reflective bird-dust side stripe from the factory, Rob sourced the replacements from Phoenix Graphix in Chandler, Arizona. “I was scared to death about installing that stripe,” he chuckles. “I took measurements on my \$300 Road Runner parts car with original paint and stripes, and Brad and I installed them.” The results speak for themselves—after 18 years, nearly \$30,000 and countless hours of labor, Rob's Hemi Road Runner is better than when it left the factory. While he wouldn't change a thing if he had to do it again, he offers these words of wisdom: “If you don't have the time, the place or the wife who will allow you to tackle such a project, don't...buy one already finished!” 🦋



Air Grabber hood was striped before the functioning mechanism was installed; it took three chrome shops to make bumpers perfect

Owner's View

In today's Hemi-crazed automotive market, owning a carefully restored vintage Mopar with factory Hemi power is like holding the Wonka chocolate bar with the gold ticket—everybody wants a piece of the glory. "Everyone tries to buy this car from me—I've never had that happen before," Rob explains. "I've had people running through a crowd at a car show to see it before I even have the car fully off the trailer, and the night of last year's Barrett-Jackson auction, I was bombarded with offers—there must have been 50 people that day who asked if it was for sale," he says. Rob has already turned down a six-figure offer for his Road Runner because he has made future plans with it: "I don't want to sell it. I built that car to keep it forever. When I retire from my job in 20 years, I would like to take it to San Diego and drive up to San Francisco, following Highway One the entire way. That will be my retirement present to myself." Even though the car has covered only 83 miles to date and is always trailered to shows, this Road Runner is like the little devil on Rob's shoulder: "I'm very protective of it. I've never left it alone, but it's so tempting to just take off and drive because it runs so sweetly.... With the Air Grabber up and my hand on the Pistol Grip shifter, I feel like I could take on anything!"



Original equipment Mopar exhaust system added sparkle to the flawless undercarriage