

A New Road Ahead

By Tom Krisher

Traditional muscle-car makers like Dodge and Chevy are opting for battery power as gas-powered classics drive into the sunset



Gas-powered muscle cars will be closing in on their final days as automakers begin replacing them with super-fast cars like this electric Dodge Daytona SRT concept. (Carlos Osorio AP)

Thundering gas-powered muscle cars, for decades a fixture of American culture, will be closing in on their final Saturday-night cruises in the coming years as automakers begin replacing them with super-fast cars that run on batteries.

Stellantis' Dodge brand, long the performance flag-bearer of the company formerly known as Fiat Chrysler, is officially moving toward electricity. Dodge recently unveiled a battery-powered Charger Daytona SRT concept car, which is close to one that will be produced in 2024 as the sun sets on some petroleum models.

Stellantis says it will stop making gasoline versions of the Dodge Challenger and Charger muscle cars and the Chrysler 300 large car by the end of next year. The Canadian factory that makes them will be converted to electric vehicles. Other automakers are moving — or have moved — in the same direction.

General Motors has said it will build an all-electric Chevrolet Corvette. Tesla says its Model S Plaid version is the fastest production vehicle made, able to go from zero to 60 mph (97 kilometers per hour) in under 2 seconds. Audi, Mercedes, Porsche and other European automakers already have high-performance electric models on sale. And Polestar, an electric-performance spinoff from Volvo, just announced a new Polestar 6 roadster for 2026.

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One reason for the industry shift is that electric vehicles are simply faster off the starting line. Their handling is typically better, too, because their heavy batteries create a low center of gravity.

Stricter government pollution requirements are another factor, too. As automakers in the U.S. face more stringent fuel-economy requirements adopted by the Biden administration and produce a broader range of EV vehicles, they will have to jettison some of their gas-fueled muscle-car models.

Tim Kuniskis, CEO of the Dodge brand, said the possibility of government fines for not meeting gas-mileage requirements hastened the shift to the electric Charger. “Compliance fines and things like that associated with a big cast-iron supercharged V8, yes, it’s tough,” he said.

And California recently voted to end the sale of gasoline-only vehicles by 2035. Still, it will take a few years for the gas-powered classics to go away. “Over the next several years, I think we’ll continue to have some internal combustion stuff, probably through most of the decade,” said Sam Abuelsamid, a research analyst at Guidehouse Insights. “But increasingly, the focus is going to be on the electric ones.”

Under new gas-mileage standards that were unveiled in April, the fleet of new vehicles will have to average around 40 miles per gallon in 2026, up from 25.4 mpg now, the EPA says. The standards are likely to become even stronger in the future, a trend that will compel U.S.-based automakers to shed some gasoline muscle cars if they are to avoid fines.

Of all major automakers, the EPA says, Stellantis had the lowest average fuel economy — 21.3 miles per gallon — and the highest average carbon dioxide emissions. So the company likely will have to eliminate some models to avoid fines. Its limited-edition Charger SRT Widebody, with a supercharged 6.2-liter Hemi Hellcat V-8, for instance, gets only 12 mpg in city driving and 21 mpg on the highway.

To many gearheads, the thought of a muscle car without noise and smells is heresy. But Kuniskis says Dodge is working hard to make the electric experience match internal combustion. The Charger, he said, will generate its own air flow to make an exhaust noise that rivals gas performance cars. And the transmission will shift gears. When the electric Charger was driven through a garage door and entered a building at a racetrack in Pontiac, Mich., it roared just like a gas muscle car.

Electric vehicles, Kuniskis said, have the potential to perform better than gas muscle cars with fast acceleration. But he said they are kind of sterile. “It doesn’t have the emotion. It doesn’t have the drama. It doesn’t have the kind of dangerous feeling that ICE (an internal combustion engine) has when it’s loud and rumbling and shifting and moving the car around.”

Kuniskis wouldn’t say how fast the electric Charger will go from zero to 60 mph, but said it would be faster than the company’s current petroleum performance cars. He also wouldn’t say the range-per-charge for the new Challenger, but added that range isn’t as important as making it a true muscle car.

Rick Nelson, the owner of Musclecar Restoration & Design in Pleasant Plains, Ill., near Springfield, cautioned that switching from loud fuel-burning engines to quiet electricity may be a hard sell to old-timers who grew up with the sounds and smells of racing.

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Nelson, 61, said he restored his first car while a teenager and spent hours at drag strips. He acknowledged that the switch to electricity is inevitable and is needed to attract a new generation that has become used to quiet speed. Still, he said, electric muscle cars won't have manual shifters, and he'll miss the smell of racing fuel at the track.

Already, Nelson said, businesses are cropping up to put electric powertrains in classic muscle cars. He has been in touch with an engineer at Tesla about retrofitting batteries and electric motors into some classics.

"Guys like me are just going to frown on it and laugh at it," Nelson said of electric muscle cars. "But this isn't about my generation." Kuniskis says the shift to electricity doesn't mean the end of the muscle car. It's just a new era.

"It's OK," he said. "Let us show you what the future looks like."

Krisher writes for the Associated Press.