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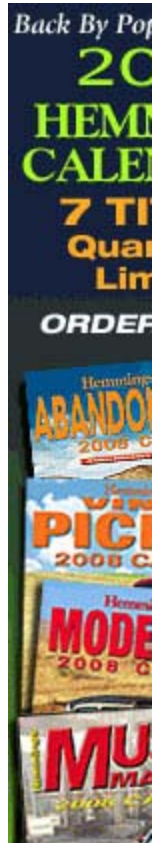
Hemmings Muscle Machines - DECEMBER 1, 2004 - BY [CRAIG FITZGERALD](#)

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Eye-opening AMC power with the '69 AMX and '74 Javelin AMX

When the definitive volume of iconic cars from the 1960s and 1970s is published, auto writers will wax on and on about Camaros, 'Cudas and Mustangs. Unfortunately, the American Motors AMX will be relegated to also-ran status, shrouded in automotive urban myth to an extent only rivaled by the Corvair. "They wouldn't hook up at the drag strip," some say. "They handled terribly," say others. "It was thrown together at the last minute; a Javelin with two feet cut out of the middle."

But it's all hoey. The 1968 AMX was a stylistic tour de force, a two-seat roadster unlike any





American car before or since. The Javelin AMX that followed it was equally stunning, its pontoon-like front fenders both looking back at American automotive history, and forward to the future of automotive design. And looks didn't tell the whole story; the performance was there, too, especially if you lined the cars up against the competition from Europe and Asia, instead of taking the easy way out and comparing them with the muscle cars of the era.

Both AMXs should have achieved legendary status. But they still sit, by and large, as underappreciated and undervalued by all but the most cognizant muscle car collectors.

The AMX story begins as far back as 1959, when Richard Teague came on board at AMC as assistant director of design. At the time, AMC sales lagged behind the three usual suspects, and the idea was that bold styling would continue to be AMC's calling card. It had been that way in the past: Hudson's aerodynamic Hornet, the Pininfarina-styled Nash-Healey, the Metropolitan, the Rambler Rebel, the Marlin. And it would be that way in the future with the economical, yet bravely futuristic Gremlin and Pacer.

But the late 1960s were vital for American Motors' viability as a major marque. Be that as it may, these years proved to be catastrophic, according to American Motors historian Patrick Foster in his *Illustrated History: AMC Cars, 1954 to 1987*. Despite restyling and revision, sales numbers continued to slide. "Fiscal year 1967 was a disaster," writes Foster. "The company recorded a loss of \$75 million on sales of \$778 million. AMC worldwide car sales sank to just 291,090."

The company was bleeding cash. "The big problem," according to Foster, "was a lack of faith in American Motors. Its dealers were discouraged, the automotive press was lukewarm about its products, and AMC's public image was as a loser." So 1968 became a pivotal year for the company. Upon the shoulders of two cars—both sharing similar DNA—the future of the entire company would rest. And in typical independent style, the cars wouldn't be high-volume, bread and butter products. They would be low-production, dramatically styled cars that the public wouldn't necessarily buy, but certainly would want to buy. AMC had an arguably undeserved reputation for building staid, underperforming cars. If it was to survive, AMC needed cars that would shed that image, posthaste.

The cars were the 1968 Javelin and AMX.

Performance-wise, AMC had proven its mettle already. Rambler Rebel SSTs were being offered with quarter-mile gears, heavy-duty cooling, and a host of other performance options. Enticingly, the cars could be fully decked out for around \$3,600, hundreds of dollars cheaper than what the competition offered. According to Edrie Marquez's *Amazing AMC Muscle*, a Rebel with a set of headers and a free-flowing exhaust could ring up 14-second quarter-mile



times at 95 mph.

Measure-for-measure, many of AMC's cars were better performers than the mainstream competition. The Marlin-with a bit of performance tuning-was able to hang with Mopar products that had a nearly 100-cubic-inch advantage over the Marlin's diminutive 343 V-8. In a contemporary test, *Motor Trend* found that, with a bit of backyard tweaking, the 343 Marlin could easily compete with a 440-cu.in. Charger. But, stylistically, the cars were as bland as cream of mushroom soup. What the company needed to get customers into the showroom was a standout. A standout that began life as early as 1965.

In January of 1966, they appeared at the Chicago Auto Show. Today, when a manufacturer shows a prototype, production muscle cars that result from them generally look pretty close. The 2005 Mustang, 300C, Ford GT and Corvette all mirror the styling studies that were shown at the various auto shows. But in 1968, nothing could have been further from the truth. That's what makes the 1968 to 1970 AMX so striking-with the exception of its radically styled front and rear fascia treatments. The rear quarter panels featured the sharp, sweeping beltline accents, the hood had similar-though non-functional-louvers. The flying buttressed rear sails even featured faux fuel fillers where the show car's filler was. As a whole, it was as close as a production car could get to the show car in 1968.

If you wanted an AMX, you got a V-8. No six-cylinder powerplants were offered. The base engine was a 225hp, 290-cu.in. V-8. Optionally, customers could order the same 343 from the Rebel SST, which made 280hp. But the real star was the AMC 390-cu.in., a killer at 315hp. In all its forms, the 390 was named for the AMX. No matter which AMC product you chose, if it had a 390, beginning in 1968 it was an "AMX 390."

The big news for 1969 was the introduction of the Big Bad cars. For the ridiculously cheap price of \$34, customers could choose one of three Big Bad color options: Big Bad Red, Big Bad Blue, and Big Bad Green, the color of Les Levasseur's featured car. Big Bad bodies and bumpers featured a monochromatic paint scheme, which was accented-not so subtly-by two fat racing stripes that went up over the hood, roof and rear decklid.

In the 1969 *American Motors Salesmen's News Flash*, the copy told salesmen that the colors would "Give you an 'In' with the performance crowd" and that they should be on the lookout for "plenty of young buyers." When they came into the showroom, sales staff should "talk their language." Quite a shift for salespeople used to selling Ramblers to housewives.

For 1969, AMC produced just 283 Big Bad Green cars. Many were fitted with four-speed transmissions, which got a free Hurst four-speed shifter in place of the problematic AMC unit. Les Levasseur's AMX features a Borg-Warner three-speed automatic, shifted via a basket-

handle, console-mounted shifter between the seats. Levasseur's AMX features a host of dealer-installed equipment. The passenger-door mirror would not have been applied at the factory, nor the sidepipes, nor the rally pack gauges. They were all available from dealers at the time of purchase, though.

Most notable upon igniting the 390 are those sidepipes. A quick rip of the throttle results in a staccato blast just outside your left ear. For the neighbors, at 5:30 a.m., it's aural assault. For us, it's a hoot. As we pulled out onto U.S. 20 in front of Lebanon Valley Dragway in West Lebanon, New York, the dual exhaust reverberated off the racetrack's fence. This is not a car for introverts.

"There's a guy that's making better aftermarket mufflers," shouts Levasseur as the Borg-Warner three-speed shifts firmly into second. "They're a lot quieter than these," which turn out to be a set of Dynomax mufflers. No matter. We're not complaining. The 315hp 390 is a beast, especially wrapped in a body that weighs just over 3,000 pounds. Power comes on right now, and would put this car easily in the league of Camaros and Mustangs with larger V-8s.

The '69 AMX feels much more race-ready than any other pony car we've driven. The car's extremely short wheelbase is partly responsible. Look into the rear well, where a back seat would be on a coupe, and it's filled with the bulging inner rear-wheel arches. Levasseur has upgraded the car with Koni shocks and Diamondback Indy 500 Firehawk metric redline radials, but the ride is still choppy.

Unlike any other car from the era, except maybe for the Corvette, which benefits from an independent rear suspension, you feel like you steer this car with the throttle. Sure, the wheel turns the front tires, but the effect is accentuated by a smooth throttle foot. Handling is crisp and sure-footed, though we figure once the hind end starts to come around on this car, you're pretty far down the road toward stuffing it deep into the underbrush. Short wheelbases are not particularly forgiving.

What they are, though, is maneuverable. In tight spaces, the Big Bad Green AMX feels like it's mounted on a set of casters, willing and able to turn around on itself if required. Out front is a relatively long hood, but behind you is, well, not much past the rear window, which you can reach back and touch from the driver's seat. It's an experience unlike any other American car we've tested.

As trendsetting as it was, the original interpretation only lasted for three years, though. Contemporary magazine articles damned it with faint praise, if any praise at all. In three years of production, 19,134 AMXs left the factory. Not bad for what amounts to a low-production

supercar, but for a small company like AMC, the investment in tooling for the specialized body hurt deeply.

For 1971, the AMX moved from its own model to an option package on the Javelin: not that AMC's Dick Teague wanted it that way. He modified his own AMX with designer Chuck Mashigan's bulging front quarters that resembled Group 7 Can-Am race car fenders, but to no avail. The AMX would live on, but as an optional trim package on not only the Javelin but also the 1977 Hornet, 1978 Concord, and the 1979-80 Spirit.

The 1971 Javelin AMX was a completely redesigned car. From a size standpoint, the car grew in every dimension, including curb weight. The only thing it shared with the 1968 to 1970 Javelin was the bucket seats. Aside from the obvious changes outside, the interior was radically revised, as well. Gauges wrapped around the driver and were set into deep squared-off pods. All the car's ancillary functions were controlled by toggle switches that moved forward and backward and were set atop a narrow shelf at the bottom of the instrument panel.

Throughout its run as a Javelin, the AMX was fitted with an ever-expanding list of optional equipment. The difference between a standard Javelin and an AMX was about \$300. Standard Javelins had a woodgrain dashboard, but AMXs all received an engine-turned appliqué for which Dick Teague had lobbied.

Sales at AMC were gaining traction. For 1972, American Motors saw its best year since 1964: \$1.4 billion with a \$30 million dollar profit. Nineteen seventy-three was bringing more of the same. But the car market was changing. Cars were getting smaller and more fuel-efficient. Some thought that the pony car market was shrinking. Little did they know that just around the corner, Trans Am and Camaro sales would shoot through the roof.

Bill Sargood purchased his 1974 AMX from Missouri just over a year ago. "It was in great condition when I bought it," he notes, though he did have the car repainted because the original paint was showing signs of wear. His automotive tastes centered largely around the Big Three, with a special interest in Mustangs, but when he went on the hunt for a new purchase, the AMX lured him in. "I started doing research on the Internet, and these cars just kept coming up," he says. "The '74 AMX comes from my era. These were the cars you saw driving around back when I didn't have the money for a new car."

If Les Levasseur's '69 AMX feels like a hard-hearted, bare-bones, full-on race car, Bill Sargood's is at the opposite end of the spectrum. The 225hp, 360-cu.in. V-8 rumbles with confidence, but has none of the harsh note of the side-piped '69. "It's underpowered," says Sargood. "There's easily a good 60hp left in this car if you bypass all that smog equipment." Sargood has spruced up the car's ignition performance with a PerTronix Ignitor solid-state

ignition system, but hasn't yet delved into extracting greater performance out of the car.

On the road, the '74 AMX feels much more like a smaller version of one of the personal luxury coupes of the early 1970s, sort of a shrunken-down Cutlass Supreme. From behind the wheel, you sit down low in the seats and try to keep your side of the road between the bulging front fenders. Downshift its Chrysler-supplied TorqueFlite 727 and the availability of usable torque makes up for the lack of horsepower. Even with the smaller V-8, the '74 is no slouch. But it's an in-between car; neither Camaro-sized nor Chevelle-sized, so it sort of falls between the two vehicles in performance and driving comfort.

We call these articles "Comparison Reports," but in this case, perhaps "Contrasting Report" might be more appropriate. These are cars that carry the same badges and come from the same companies, but couldn't come from two more different points in the history of the industry. Choosing one over the other is a matter of taste. Are you in it for the time slips or for the long haul? There's one that's a clear winner for each category, and you can probably figure that out for yourself. Values vary wildly between two-seat AMXs and four-place Javelin AMXs. Because of their rarity, the two-seater is the value proposition, but know in both circumstances that you're going to pay through the nose for parts. The target emblem on the trunk of Bill Sargood's car, for example, took six months to find, and came at a heady cost.

These are not cars that you will rebuild out of a catalog. NOS parts are getting more and more scarce by the week. But the satisfaction in owning a car that you don't see every single day, or on the cover of every single magazine, is certainly worth the pain and suffering of searching for parts. Our choice? The '69 Big Bad Green AMX. But invest in a set of earplugs; or the '74 AMX, if you're planning on driving it any distance.

Owners' Views

I never had interest in AMC until I found a 1974 Javelin AMX with a 401 for my friend who was looking to buy an old car. I started researching and doing my homework on AMC, and I was hooked. The two-seat AMX caught my eye. The Big Bad Green car you see here is my second AMX. Going to shows and cruises, and hearing what other owners have to say about AMXs, is a special experience. AMC cars are a challenge, especially when it comes to buying parts. When you find that rare part you're looking for, you pay top dollar, but it's worth it to have such a unique car. It would be nice to see more people get involved in AMC, but for all you AMC fanatics out there, keep up the good work!

- Les Levasseur

I was really going down the road of Torinos, Cyclones and Dusters or Demons when I happened to see a local car dealer ad for a '73 AMX. I went up to check it out the next day, and it had been snatched up its first day on the lot. I started looking at these cars, and the more I looked, the more hooked I became. With their bulged hood and fenders, the spoilers and flared roofline, every angle looked like the Seventies style I was looking for. Now that I have my AMX, I'm not at all disappointed. The car runs and handles well and is just plain fun to drive. No matter where I stop, people want to come over and talk to me about the car.
- Bill Sargood

Specifications:

| | 1969 AMC AMX | 1974 AMC Javelin AMX |
|-------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Displacement | 390 cubic inches | 360 cubic inches |
| Bore x Stroke | 4.17 x 3.57 inches | 4.08 x 3.44 inches |
| Compression Ratio | 10.2:1 | 8.5:1 |
| Horsepower@ RPM | 315 @ 4,600 | 220 @ 4,400 |
| Torque@RPM | 425 lbs.ft. @ 3,200 | 315 lbs.ft. @ 3,100 |
| Fuel system | Carter AFB four-barrel | Motorcraft 4300 four-barrel |
| Weight | 2,826 pounds | 3,184 pounds |
| Pounds per HP | 8.97 | 14.47 |
| 1/4-mile ET | 15.2 seconds (est.) | N/A |

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