

WE DRIVE **BILL MITCHELL'S** TRANS AM!



Hemmings

# MUSCLE MACHINES

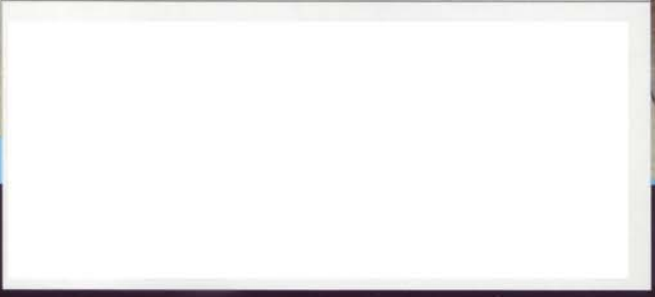
THE ULTIMATE ALL-AMERICAN PERFORMANCE CAR MAGAZINE

## MODIFIED **MUSCLE**

**PERFORMANCE BEYOND THE FACTORY**



SEPTEMBER, 2008 HEMMING'S MUSCLE MACHINES #60 \$4.99



► **BUYER'S GUIDE**  
1966-'67 FAIRLANE





## CASTING CALL

Restoring 1980s muscle means tackling aluminum wheels; we show you what works and what doesn't

Note the craptacular flaking clear coat. AMC left the raised spokes of the TurboCast II wheels with an unpainted, machined surface, which we wanted to preserve, but it had suffered stains over time. Sandblasting would've quickly removed those stains, but it also would have marred the machined surface.

By Daniel Strohl

Photography by Daniel Strohl and David LaChance

**We've harped on the collectibility of later 1970s and 1980s** muscle cars in the pages of this magazine nearly endlessly since the very first issue, and well we should. Not everybody wants to—or can—shell out the dough for a performance car from the golden era of muscle, leaving later performance cars an affordable option for the rest of us.

But for the most part, we've kinda glossed over one of the main objections to alternative muscle: Those cars require alternative restoration methods as well. Concerns over plastics and computers lead those objections, but not far behind are concerns over aluminum wheel restoration.

While steel wheel restoration is fairly straightforward (see the Magnum 500 resto story in *HMM* #58), we'd heard plenty of horror

stories about aluminum wheels, mostly related to their porosity and their softness, so we wanted to avoid sandblasting and potentially damaging the wheels.

But we still had a set of AMC TurboCast II aluminum wheels for Project HMX that looked rather shabby. The black paint in the recesses had started to fade and wear from nearly 30 years of neglect, and the clear coat had started to blister away from the wheels, leading us to believe some previous owner applied it hastily and incorrectly.

So we not only needed to remove the clear coat, but also prepare the surface underneath for refinishing, and we had to do it all without damaging the aluminum. With four wheels to strip, we decided to test a variety of methods and see which method best met our goals.



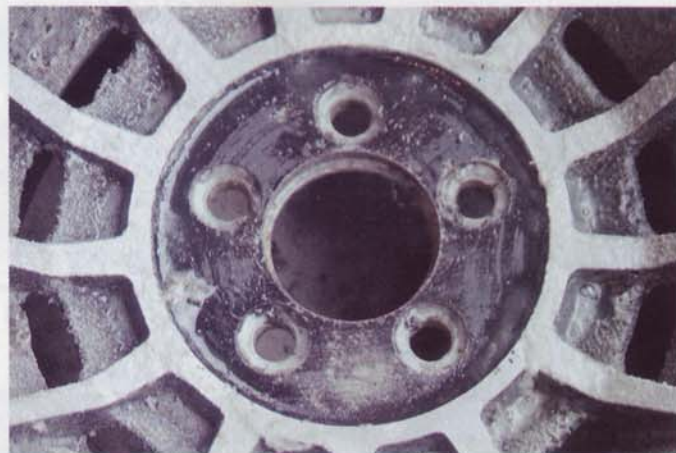
So we first tried two-inch sanding pads chucked into our regular, everyday DeWalt drill. Specifically, the pads were GatorGrit Surface Stripping and Rust Removal discs that we found at the local hardware store. We started with the coarse pads, figuring we'd move to the medium and fine pads later if necessary.



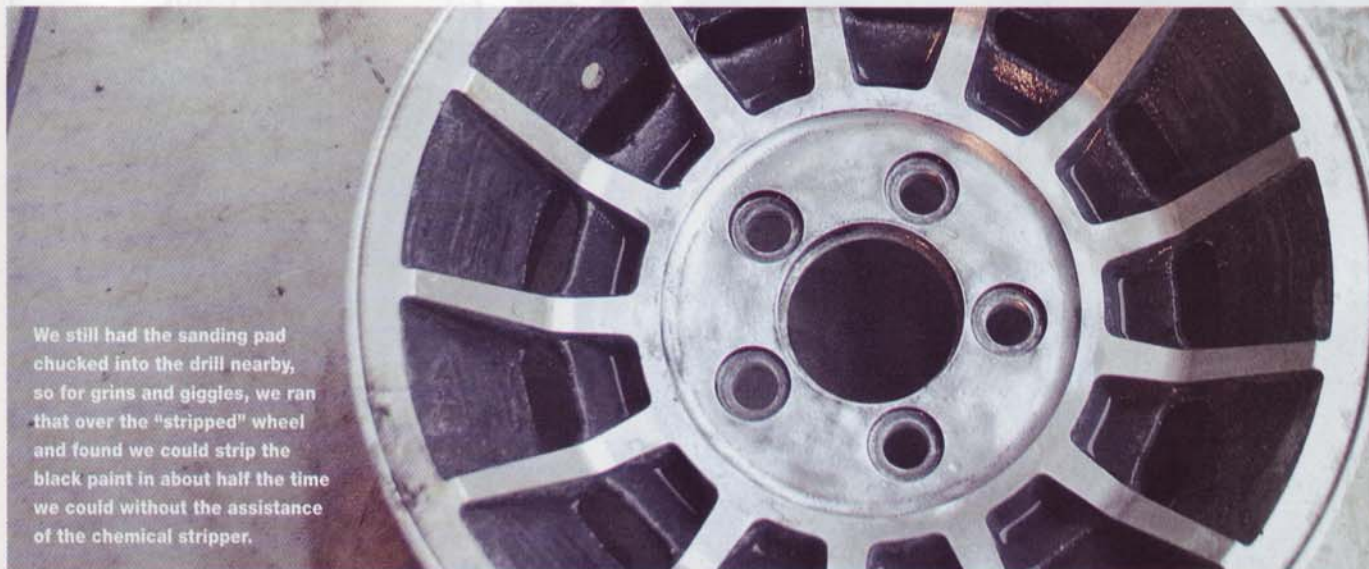
And the coarse pads worked. Kinda. We found that patience pays off with this method—it took about 20 minutes to strip the paint from half of the center of one wheel. And while not too aggressive, the pads slightly marred the surface, removing the natural grain of the cast wheels along with the black paint. We also wondered how we could navigate in the inner recesses, which were much smaller than the size of the pad.



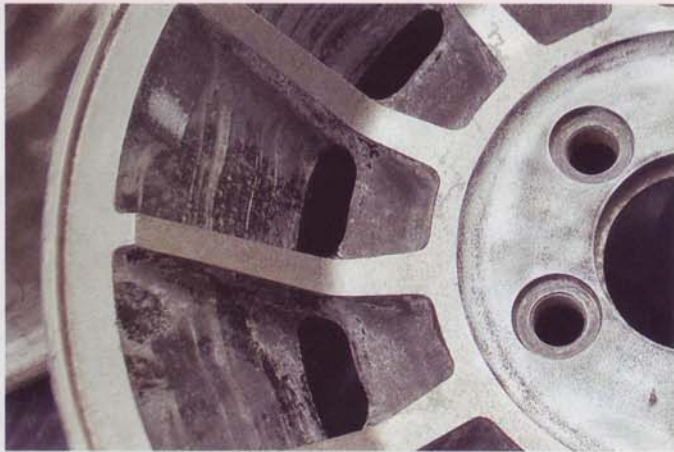
Moving on to the next wheel, we decided to take a chemical approach with Captain Lee's Auto Sprz'-Strip paint remover. Captain Lee's claims the paint remover is safe on all metals and even specifically states that it removes clear coat from wheels. Following the instructions, we sprayed it on and waited five to 10 minutes.



Indeed, the clear coat bubbled off almost immediately, and we were able to wipe it all away easily with a plastic scraper. But when we tried to do the same to the paint in the recesses, we found that the stripper had hardly touched the black finish. We sprayed another layer of stripper, but with the same no-result. Perhaps this black paint was tougher than we thought.



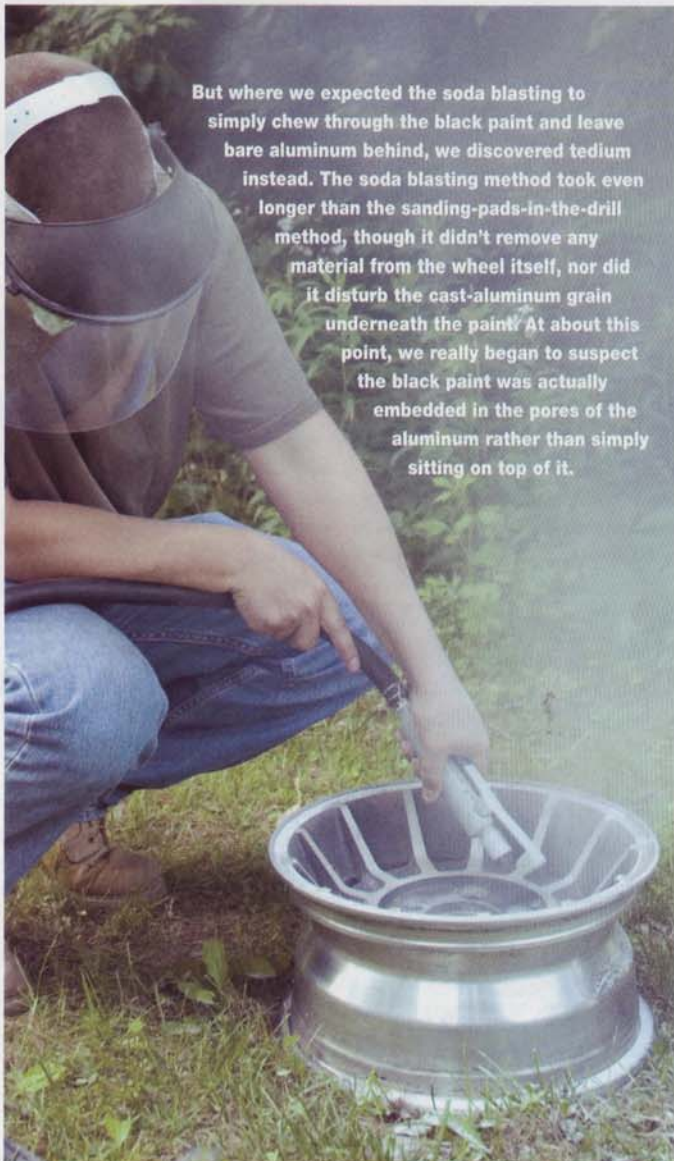
We still had the sanding pad chucked into the drill nearby, so for grins and giggles, we ran that over the "stripped" wheel and found we could strip the black paint in about half the time we could without the assistance of the chemical stripper.



But we still had the problem of the inner recesses to deal with, so we washed off the rest of the paint stripper and set the wheel aside overnight. The next morning, we were pleasantly surprised to see that the paint stripper had somehow continued to eat away at the black paint, revealing the bare cast aluminum in some places. We surmised that, given a couple days, the paint stripper would probably have been able to remove the paint from all four wheels.



We still had two wheels to strip, and based on the results of our soda blasting tech story (see *HMM* #55), we thought we'd give our Eastwood blasting rig another try.



But where we expected the soda blasting to simply chew through the black paint and leave bare aluminum behind, we discovered tedium instead. The soda blasting method took even longer than the sanding-pads-in-the-drill method, though it didn't remove any material from the wheel itself, nor did it disturb the cast-aluminum grain underneath the paint. At about this point, we really began to suspect the black paint was actually embedded in the pores of the aluminum rather than simply sitting on top of it.



Oh, yeah, the backsides of the wheels. It appeared as though nobody over the last 30 years realized that brake dust accumulates there, causing the backsides to resemble a toxic waste dump. Here, however, the soda blaster worked like a champ, removing the brake dust with ease. Remember, kids, brake dust—especially from 30 years ago—contains asbestos, so make sure to wear a super-duper dust mask during this step. Keeping the blasting surface wet (as Eastwood recommends) will help keep the dust down as well.



Getting frustrated with the black paint, we resorted to extreme measures. Sampling both a flap wheel and a wire cup in our 4 1/2-inch angle grinder quickly proved regrettable.



Yeah, both the flap wheel and wire cup took off the paint faster than any method we've yet tried, but they also took off obscene amounts of aluminum, especially around well-defined edges. Note in the photo where the steps for the lugnut holes had become rounded rather than sharp right angles. In addition, this method includes all the negatives of the sanding pad method, specifically the marring of the surface and the inability to get into tight recesses.



We stated earlier we wanted to avoid sandblasting, but we thought we'd toss one wheel in the cabinet to see just how bad it could really be. Editor-in-Chief Richard Lentinello had fast-cutting media in his cabinet at the time, and it took down the brake dust on the backs of the wheels just as fast as the soda blasting method did.



On the fronts of the wheels, the grungy clearcoat scurried from the sand like cockroaches run from light, but the media, again, hardly touched the black paint. On the bare aluminum spokes, the sandblasting did indeed remove any staining, but left behind a texture much rougher than the original machined surface.



So we came up with a plan. Compromise, really. If nothing we'd tried so far was going to lift that black paint without damaging the wheel, we'd settle for at least removing the clearcoat, dirt, stains and brake dust with the sandblaster, then just rough up the black paint. We'd have to replicate the machined surface on the spokes, however, so we decided to pull out the drill again and use the edge of the sanding pad to get more even strokes against the metal. Using the pad itself would only net us swirl marks in the metal.



After edge-sanding the spokes, rim and inner unpainted surface, we then taped up the spokes with Frog Tape, which claimed to prevent bleeding common in other masking tapes.



We primed both front and back surfaces, then painted the backs with Rust-Oleum's stainless steel rattlean paint, which looks rather like bare magnesium.



And then we hit the fronts with a semi-gloss black. Note our high-dollar paint booth, located in the bed of the author's pickup truck.



It appears the Frog Tape does exactly what it claims: We couldn't find any evidence of paint bleeding around the spokes. Though difficult to see in the picture, the Rust-Oleum did fill in some of the sanding marks in the center portion of the wheel, but not all. The Rust-Oleum also perfectly matched the original semi-gloss black. Now we just need to assemble a full set of good center caps and lugnuts; the junky ones that came with these wheels will look even worse now that the wheels look so darn good.

**OLD AIR** *Cooling the Classics*  
**PRODUCTS**  
Division of Gold Air Products Inc.

# HURRICANE®

## CUSTOM HEAT AND A/C SYSTEMS

- Eighty Pass Coil For Max Cooling
- Custom Kits Available
- High Performance Super-kool Condenser
- Fast And Easy Install
- Compressors Available In Polished
- High Output 365 Cfm Blower or Chrome Finishes

817 • 531 • 2665 24 Hour Fax Line 817 • 531 • 3257 8744 Forum Way Fort Worth, TX 76140  
[www.oldairproducts.com](http://www.oldairproducts.com) or E-mail us at [sales@oldairproducts.com](mailto:sales@oldairproducts.com)

**Over**  
**2,000,000**  
**STEERING & SUSPENSION**  
**Parts In Stock!**

**Custom Manufacturing**  
**Any Make, Any Model, Any Year**  
**1930 to the current year.**  
*All Parts Meet Or Exceed OEM Tested and Inspected!*

**RARE**  
**PARTS**  
INC.

**STEERING AND SUSPENSION**

**800-585-7961 RAREPARTS.COM**