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THE TOP 21 HOTTEST COLLECTOR CARS

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Cars that enthusiasts want today, and will want tomorrow



Peaks and valleys. That's how one individual explained the stock market to me one day when I was first starting to dabble in it. Dabbling aside, the same can be said about the classic car market, with some degree of accuracy. Not unlike the stock of your favorite American automotive company, what was hot four years ago has all of a sudden tanked.

In previous editions, we challenged our team of gearhead editors to arrive at a general consensus for 25 Future Classics, 25 Fun Classics Under \$15,000, and others along the same theme. What's hot today is a completely different pile of steel on wheels, and as a

result, we've upped the challenge.



In a scene out of Stanley Kramer's *It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, the staff submitted their nominations, then gathered for a roundtable discussion--it didn't matter whether our tastes reside in brass, muscle, pre-war or post-war--to hammer the dents out of the oil pan of confusion as to what's hot, and what's not. We dove deep into auction trends, as well as the goings on inside the cover of *Hemmings Motor News* to confirm or deny the status of our full-size list. Eliminating the one-offs and concept cars that the common Joe has no chance of buying, here is a compact version of what we've arrived at; in order of alphabetical appearance.

AMC AMX, 1968-1970

Really taking off in the muscle car market is AMC's AMX. Normally equipped with a 225hp 290, 1968 options include a 280hp, 343-cu.in. V-8, and a bullet of a 315hp 390. Changed little the following year, the hottest AMXs are the Big Bad versions. Its third year of existence proved to be its final and, though the AMX designation found its way onto Javelins and Hornets, it left its mark among AMC collectors' minds as a great alternative for power and style compared to the Category 5 Hemi hurricane that continues to blow through auction houses.

Buick Model F, 1906-1910

The addition of an early brass-era Buick might surprise a few. The Model F Touring is quickly gaining momentum, thanks to several factors, one being their horsepower rating, 22, which is higher than most other two-cylinder models of the period. It's a sizable early automobile, making family touring an enjoyable event for all, and it fits well into HCCA's one- and two-cylinder tours. Let's not forget that of the early autos, it's also a proven runner and, while combined with the aforementioned, it's an all-win situation for fun around the neighborhood block and on that long club tour across a county or two.

Buick Skylark, 1953-1954

Released as a special 50th Anniversary model based on the Roadmaster in 1953, the Skylark is perhaps still the single most sought-after classic Buick, if not in the entire marque lineup. Though 1954 production numbers are lower, they were based instead on the new Century platform (basically a Special with the larger Roadmaster engine) with a radical styling that leaves admirers favoring '53 or '54, but rarely both. Values have always been high, and should continue to be so because, collectively, only 2,526 were produced.



Cadillac Convertible, 1939-1941

Much like its La Salle sibling, pre-war convertible Cadillacs have attracted the attention of hungry buyers looking for sporty elegance. In profile, designers rounded the sharp lines and tipped the top of the grille toward the windshield. Combined with a long hood, a sloping rear deck and, with the top down, a low roofline, the 1939 Cadillac looks like a classic European sports exotic. Even the four-door convertibles have an air of stateliness about them; a look that is quickly gaining momentum considering the recent muscle market trend.

Chevrolet, 1958

On the upswing are the four-headlamp 1958 models, unlike the faltering previous-year models. Completely reengineered and restyled with a longer, lower look, these models are not only more distinctive looking than the ever popular 1955-'56-'57 models, but they are far more affordable. Though air suspension models proved to have difficulties, everything else about the totally new platform was such a hit, it shot Chevy to the top of the domestic list. Power was not left out of the equation, meaning that sporty models are plentiful, even with fuel injection.

Chevrolet Impala, 1960

Clean, refined styling always seems to produce a lustful appeal that can span decades. Such is the case with this Impala. The rear wings are squared off, complementing the jet-inspired side moldings. A host of other minute changes have Bowtie fans taking another look once again at the Impala. Compared to the 1959 models, these big beauties have a striking, yet more conservative design that many enthusiasts find more attractive. And that spacious interior...wow.

Chevrolet Chevelle SS 454 LS6, 1970

As is the case with most high-performance Chevys, the 1968-'72 redesigned A-body generation carries such a lustful fan following, it's tough to determine which model year Chevelle is top dog, at times. Perfectly restored examples of the highly desired 450hp, 454-cu.in. LS6 big-block have been obtaining such lofty prices you'd think buyers were throwing their hard-earned coin at a Hemi. Even less than perfect examples have hit the \$100,000 mark, yet bowtie fanatics drool over the possibilities of finding one in dear old Aunt Mildred's collapsing barn in the backyard.

Chevrolet LT-1 Corvette, 1970-1972

Arguably, the LT-1 is the greatest small-block ever. Produced with the best-forged TRW internals, only 4,977 of these high-revving, solid-lifter models were ever built. The 1970 models were the best, with 370hp and 11.0:1 compression ratio, but for driving with today's fuels, we suggest you lean toward the '71 and '72 models with lower compression ratios; 9.5 in 1971 and even lower in 1972, the final year. The really rare ones are the '72s with factory



air conditioning. Records indicate about 240 were built. These cars sell in the low \$30,000 range and up now, but get 'em while you can. These cars are the future 435s and will be \$100,000 sooner than later.

Chrysler 300F/G/H Convertible, 1960-1962

Chrysler's letter series 300s, seemingly regardless of model year, have been near the top of the demand list at one time or another. Its status as a first generation muscle car, prior to the use of the term, no doubt has carried the letter series farther than any other Chrysler of the time. But the voluptuous models sought after today are the Ram-Tuned F, G and H convertible models when they were still considered the top-of-the-line Chryslers with their own styling; after 1962, they were blended into the rest of the Mopar line. No longer the sleepers that they once were, these dual-carb creations are finally being appreciated for their unique combination of style, comfort and high performance.

De Soto Two-door Hardtop, 1961

It's still somewhat amazing to think that the 1961 De Soto was produced for a grand total of only 47 days. New features such as canted headlamps and a stunningly different double-tiered grille did not alter sales enough to make a difference in the marque's destiny. Yet, here we are, 46 years later, watching these forgotten creations rise like a phoenix from the ashes of its past. Of the mere 3,100 production total--by some published accounts--all of them hardtops, only 911 were two-doors, thus making them one of the hottest De Sotos sought out today.

Dodge Challenger, 1970-1971

With values of its stable mate 'Cuda already well into the stratosphere, the next place one turns to is its genetic cousin. The Challenger has long played second fiddle, but now these Mopar big-block creations are getting scooped up almost as fast as they leave the garages they've been hiding in. The not-so-recent news of the nameplate's resurrection is certainly only going to increase the desire to own past and present editions long before the 2009s hit the showroom.

Ford Mustang K-Code, 1965-1967

Not to dismiss the Mustang as a has-been in the collector car market, but the badge has cooled recently, with only a handful of exceptions. Such is the case with the initial K-Code offerings Ford made available, the hottest Mustang changing hands today. The high-performance V-8 is a 289-cu.in. small-block thumping out 271hp, which at the time was quite the little head-turner in an otherwise unannounced wrapper; except, of course, its out-of-the-ordinary styling. Early Mustangs have always been in high demand, but the K-Code reigns king today. And with nearly every body and trim part having been reproduced, restoring one is easy.

Ford Thunderbird F-Code, 1957

While Ford's most notable Thunderbird may have lost some of its elevation in recent years, not so for the F-Code equipped two-seater; in fact, it continues to be the most desirable first-generation T-Bird, thanks to its 300hp, supercharged, 312-cu.in. V-8. A slight styling change in 1957 offers more grace to match the power, just prior to the blasphemy--according to some--of the four-seaters that followed in 1958. If you find one of the 208 or 211 produced, according to different sources, be prepared to pay dearly. With demand outstripping supply, prices will continue to rise.

La Salle Convertible, 1940

Conventional wisdom would tell you that a two-door convertible would fetch top dollar in most collectible model year releases. Cadillac's 1940 La Salle four-door sedan convertible continues to break the rules of conventional thinking--more so today than ever before. That's not to take away from the other convertibles in the 1940-model-year lineup. In fact, the entire fleet of the final year of Cadillac's cousin is rivaling the selling mark once thought unobtainable for a sub-series car. Last-gasp La Salles are still regarded as the most stylish ever to leave the assembly line, and their low-production uniqueness is commanding more attention each passing day.

Oldsmobile W-30 & W-31, 1967-1971

Simply put, these high-performance models are the hottest Oldsmobile options on the planet, and for the time being, it looks as if there is no letting up. While the world scrambled for A-Body Chevys and Pontiacs, someone finally took notice of the GM genetic cousin; many are following suit fast. While the 455-cu.in. big-block W-30 4-4-2 will generate the biggest buzz, the W-31 small-block 350 planted under the hood of non 4-4-2 models is an excellent alternative with plenty of grunt of its own.

Packard Convertible, 1953-1954

"America's new choice in fine cars," as it was advertised in 1953, is still a hit with collectors today. As with most of the other makes, Caribbean convertibles are the trump card among the last of the pre-Studebaker Packards; even the 1954 models are becoming more sought after. Grilles and side trim are fresh, a four-barrel carburetor, increased horsepower ratings and power steering were all welcome additions when new. It's evident that Packard had been refocused on the luxury market when these rolled off the line new, but the market had left them in the dust until now.

Plymouth 'Cuda, 1970-1971

You don't have to ask which ones are hot. Any with a big-block and/or multiple carburetors will do: 440, Hemi, 340 6-pack...they're so hot that even cloned Hemi cars are going for six figures now. If that's not heat, we don't know what is. Because enthusiasts have always found

the styling of these cars so attractive, with that brawny-yet-clean look that muscle car fans love so much, 'Cudas will remain top-shelf collector cars for as long as Exxon Mobil produces gasoline.

Pontiac Ram-Air IV GTO, 1969-1971

So you have a GTO? Not to sound pretentious, but is yours equipped with the highly desirable Ram Air IV option? Introduced for the 1969 model year, the Ram Air IV produced a healthy 370hp. Of course, the ultimate Ram Air model is the Ram Air V, but because so few GTOs were so equipped with this over-the-counter option it's easier to find a needle in a haystack. Other desirable Ram Air GTOs include the 1970 455 HO and, to a lesser extent, the 1971-'72 HO versions, and the more readily available Ram Air IIIs. If you find yourself lusting over the thought of owning one, you're not alone as many muscle car aficionados considers RA IV's far better to drive than Hemi cars.

Studebaker Starliner, 1953

Upon seeing the radical 1953 Studebakers, Motor World reported that Loewy's design team, "Made every other American car look 10 years older." That having been said, it still holds true today, and the top-of-the-line Starliner Coupe is quickly gaining in popularity, much like it did back in the day when it outsold sedans four-to-one. The graceful, European-influenced lines that pre-date the once-hot Hawks, now slowly drying up in the market, are once again influencing collectors looking for something just a bit different from the norm.

Pontiac Super Duty Trans Am and Formula, 1973-1974

The Trans Am models became instantly recognizable beginning with the 1973 model, thanks to the addition of what is commonly called the Thunder Chicken graphics. However, the real draw isn't what's on the hood, but rather under it. And the real golden egg is the Super Duty 455--a race engine detuned for street use with its strengthened block, high-lift camshaft, forged pistons and connecting rods, and specially designed cylinder heads. No longer a backseat pony car, SD-455-equipped Trans Ams and Formulas are among the hottest Pontiacs, and their low production figures should keep the asking prices soaring with the Thunder Chicken.

Shelby G.T.350, 1965

Keeping a continued high profile for seemingly decades, original 1965 models, are already unobtainium--\$250,000-plus for a properly restored one. Transitional '65s come next--1965 Mustangs were actually modified by Shelby in the 1966 model year. There were enough '66s to go around that the prices aren't so crazy by comparison. However, once Ol' Shel passes on, you know that these are going to skyrocket even further into the stratosphere.

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