

MALCOLM GUNN
WHEELBASE COMMUNICATIONS

Musclecars and horsepower go together like shoes and shoe laces. But what made these eye-blink-quick chariots so unique was the fact that none began as purpose-built performance cars.

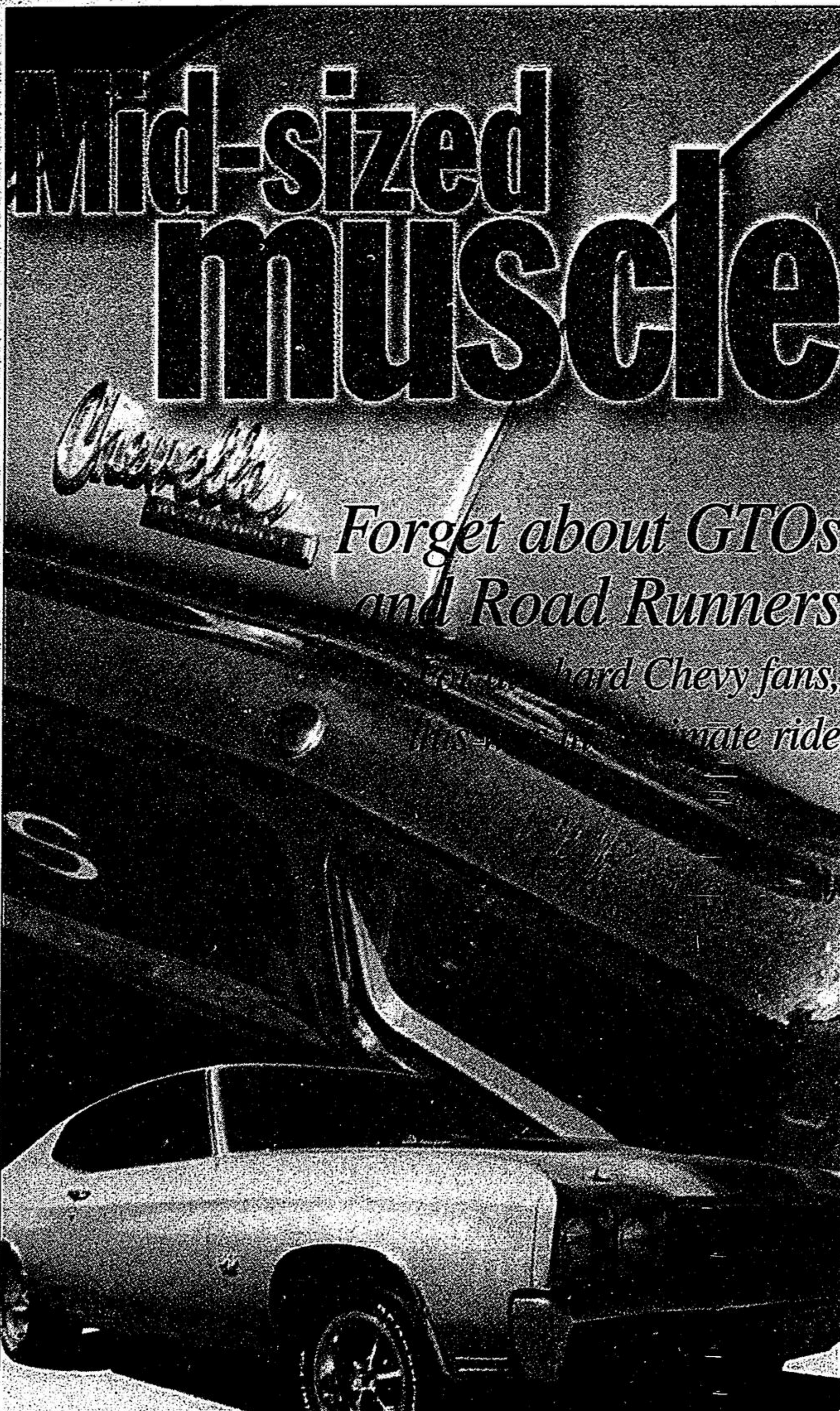
Unlike Jaguar XKEs, Ferraris or even Corvettes, nearly all Musclecars began as simple A-to-B family coupes that were originally designed as economical versions of their full-sized siblings.

This philosophy certainly holds true with the potent Chevelle SS 396. This car's roots date back to the autumn of 1963 when the Chevelle was launched as Chevrolet's first intermediate 'A-body' car. The Chevelle was built to fill a niche that was half-way between the compact Chevy II that was introduced in 1962 and the full-size bread-and-butter Chevrolet Biscayne, Bel Air and Impala models.

The first-year 1964 Chevelle was available in two- and four-door sedan variations, as well as a distinctive two-door hardtop and sweet-looking convertible. A Chevelle offshoot, the part-car, part-truck El Camino was also reintroduced that year. Although a sensible OHV six-cylinder engine was standard, you could order the car with either the 283 or 327 cubic-inch V8 that powered the bigger Chevs. In Malibu Super Sport (hence the SS designation) trim, complete with bucket seats, floor shifter and spinner-style wheel covers, the Chevelle was not only downright attractive, but reasonably quick.

The same year the Chevelle was introduced, Pontiac Chevy's in-house rival, unleashed the GTO, a high-performance spin-off of the intermediate Tempest. With 389 cubic inches under its belt, the GTO left everything else in its wake. Suddenly everyone — GM, Ford and Chrysler — began tooling up for what was to become the most ferocious horsepower battle ever seen, with their respective intermediate coupes and hardtops in the role of storm troopers.

Chevrolet scrambled to respond to the horsepower wars by creating its own version of Pontiac's 'Goat', as it came to be known. Staying within the GM-mandated 400 cubic-inch limit, the division launched the Malibu SS 396 option late into the 1965 model year. Originally rated at 325 horsepower, by 1967 the 'big-block' powerhouse



FINE LINES

CHEVELLE SS 396

could be ordered in either 350 or 375-horsepower versions. The latter featured solid valve lifters that facilitated high-RPM operation, but required continual attention to keep the engine in proper tune.

Only a handful of SS 396s were produced in 1965, but, in the following year, an incredible 72,000 of these high-performance beasts were churned out. Not only was the car's power a major attraction for the street- or drag racing-minded, but, at a cheap-thrills base price of around \$3,000, almost anyone could afford to get behind the wheel.

The wildly successful Chevelle and Tempest/Le Mans intermediates helped General Motors post record sales throughout the mid-'60s. By that time, GM's share of all foreign and domestic passenger cars sold in North America hovered around 60 per cent, with half of that chunk of the pie belonging to Chevrolet alone.

Chevrolet's successive generations of A-bodied Chevells continued to be the most popular intermediates around, and the SS 396 was far and away the best-selling musclecar.

But by 1970, smog control devices were federally-mandated on all cars. Chevy quietly increased the 396's engine displacement to 402 cubic inches that year to maintain peak horsepower. However the car continued to be badged as an SS 396.

But just as the musclecar phenomena had surpassed its peak, Chevrolet unleashed the baddest SS of them all, the SS 454. In 1970 and 1971, this 454-cube monster motor delivered a top rating of 450 gross horsepower, making it a formidable challenger on the street and on the strip.

The following year, ever-tightening emissions regulations resulted in a severe horsepower curtailment for the muscle-bound Chevelle. You could still order the SS with its 454 engine, but the car operated with significantly reduced output.

The Chevelle Super Sport had now joined the remaining emasculated musclecars and Pony cars as mere shadows of their former glory.

Malcolm Gunn is Wheelbase Communications' chief road tester and historic writer. Wheelbase is a world-wide supplier of automobile news, reviews and features.



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