

Running With the Rebels:

The Return of the Dodge Charger

By Roger Witherspoon

General Lee and the horse he rode in on were never welcome in our house.

My great great grandfather, Walker Elliott Smith, spent the Civil War years with the Pennsylvania Cavalry, happily gunning down anybody who ran with Lee and the Stars and Bars. As kids, we were regaled with tall tales of Grandpa Walker's battlefield heroics and how President Lincoln only freed the few slaves Walker hadn't already liberated.

So a popular TV show featuring a Dodge Charger named General Lee – which sported the confederate battle flag and carried a couple of modern-day rebels from one episode to another – was never shown in our living room. But the car was visible everywhere. It had attitude at a time when that wasn't a widely used term, and the car had a reputation for speed, power and the ability to own the road. Too bad the rebs had it.

So it was a surprise when Ralph Gilles, the talented black designer for Daimler Chrysler, the man behind the smooth Chrysler 300 and the powerful Dodge Viper, said he was bringing the Charger back.

“When you say Charger,” said Gilles, “everyone thinks of the 69 Charger and the Dukes of Hazard. Until the Viper came along, the whole idea was that that was the most aggressive car in the Dodge lineup.

“We weren't bringing the 69 Charger, the General Lee, back. We were trying to evolve the old Charger and create a car with an unmistakable presence.”

Evolve is right. The creative sculptor in Gilles looked at the best selling Chrysler 300C – a smooth, graceful, upscale platform with a powerful 5.7 liter 340 horsepower Hemi V-8 engine – and decided that with a little change in the sculpture, he could have a totally different vehicle. So, while the windshield, engine, dashboard, console, chassis and wheel base are the same, the car rolling out of the Ontario, Canada assembly plant was suddenly different.

It lost the grill that was reminiscent of the stately Bentley, and with it, the calm sedate atmosphere of the 300C. Instead, Gilles stretched the car another four inches and put in the distinctive, aggressive Dodge grille to give the Charger a lower overall stance that he viewed as the look of a prowling cat. But the cat is 260 pounds lighter than the 300C – a weight differential which clearly shows when you open up the Hemi engine.

“The feeling behind the Charger is mostly attitude. And that's what we were aiming for,” explained Gilles.

Those who loved the old General Lee will note the most obvious difference: the 69 Charger was a two-door coupe, while the 2006 Charger is a four-door. That is because tastes have evolved over the decades. In 1970, two-door coupes comprised 80 percent of the sports car market. Today, 80 percent of that segment are four-door sport sedans.

The aggressive attitude is the only real link between the General Lee and the 2006 Charger. It has its own look.

A young couple stood in the parking lot, whispering to each other. The young man would stare silently for a few moments, staring at the red Charger and then whisper into her ear. After a few minutes, the young woman turned to me and said “he’s in love with your car.”

The Charger easily passes the head-turning test.

It comes in two flavors: one that simply looks aggressive, and one that really is.

The Charger SXT is, essentially, a youthful, aggressive looking comfortable sport model of the more sedate Chrysler 300C. It is powered by a 3.5 liter high-output, 24-valve V-6 engine delivering 250 horsepower and 250 pound-feet of torque. The SXT with this small engine can even take regular gasoline and, fully loaded, costs only \$28,330.

It had the amenities you’d want in a comfortable sedan. The entertainment center included a six-in-dash CD changer, MP3 radio, and Sirius Satellite Digital radio. The leather bucket seats are heated in the front, and fold down in a 60/40 split in the rear. This isn’t a car intended for drag racing, but you can comfortably push triple digits on the open road.

The Charger R/T, however, is another breed of cat. This one has the Hemi V-8 engine with 390 pound-feet of torque and is the modern descendant of the General Lee. Taking it airborne like the Dukes of Hazard regularly did is not recommended: but the Charger is not intended for sedate driving, either.

Coming east out of Georgia, the highway wound through the North Carolina forests with long straight stretches, few cars, well-banked curves and only trees and turkey buzzards for witnesses. The Beamer convertible slid by at about 90 miles and hour, slowed, the driver waved, and then took off. I’d have ignored him: but the road was dry, the sun was shining, there was no one around, and he had the Stars and Bars on his bumper.

Downshifting to take off after the Beamer wasn’t necessary – the Hemi is mated to a five-speed automatic and comes with all-speed traction control and an electronic stability program. I hit the gas. In cruising mode, the Hemi uses only four cylinders to cut down on gas consumption. Flooring the pedal set all cylinders on burn. The rumble grew from the dual exhausts and I rocked back deeper into the bucket seat as the Charger jumped into triple digits. We hit the long left curve evenly at 110 and the Beamer began to slow to retain control.

But the Charger R/T has a wide, stance, its weight is evenly distributed over its 18-inch wheels, and it grips curves tighter than a gangsta grips a hip-hop groupie. So I waved goodbye, came out of the turn at 120 and never saw the Beamer again.

The R/T has a few more amenities than the SXT model. The console includes a navigation system that’s detailed and easy to use, and the six Boston Acoustic speakers have a 322-watt amplifier that would leave the average teenager happily deaf. It also has a DVD player in the center console to entertain the back seat passengers. The engine has upgraded to premium gas, and gets about 18 MPG.

As a long distance touring car, the Charger is top-notch, with all the comforts of a home on wheels. But there is no doubt that at its core, it’s a powerful road racer that feels as good as it looks. Even Grandpa Walker would raise his sword, salute, and smile.

2006 Dodge Charger R/T

MSRP: **\$35,500**
EPA Mileage: **17 mpg city** **25 mpg highway**
Test Car: **18.2 mpg highway**

Performance/ Safety:
0-60 6.0 Seconds

5.7 Liter Hemi Multi Displacement, fuel-injected V-8 engine producing 340 horsepower and 390 pound-feet of torque; 5-speed automatic transmission; dual rear exhaust; 18-inch aluminum polished wheels; touring suspension; power rack-and-pinion steering; performance anti-lock 4-wheel disc brakes; all-speed traction control; electronic stability control; emergency brake assist; front multistage air bags; fog lamps; tire pressure monitor; Halogen headlights; power heated fold-away mirrors.

Comfort:

AM/FM radio; 6-in-dash CD changer and MP3 player; Sirius Satellite Radio; 6 Boston Acoustic speakers with 322-watt amplifier and subwoofer; GPS Navigation system; keyless entry; leather trimmed bucket seats, steering wheel and shift knob; 8-way power driver's seat; heated front seats; front lumbar supports; rear 60/40 folding seats; tilt/telescope steering wheel; power windows; power adjustable pedals power sunroof.

2006 Dodge Charger SXT

EPA MSRP: **\$28,330**
Mileage: **19 mpg city** **27 mpg highway**

Performance/Safety:

3.5 Liter High Output fuel-injected V-6 engine producing 250 horsepower and 250 pound-feet of torque; 5-speed automatic transmission; dual rear exhaust; 17-inch aluminum wheels, touring suspension; power rack-and-pinion steering; front air bags; all-speed traction control; electronic stability program; emergency brake assist; halogen headlamps; fog lamps; anti-lock 4-wheel disc brakes.

Comfort:

AM/FM radio; 6-in-dash CD changer and MP3 player; Sirius Satellite Radio; 6 Boston Acoustic speakers with 276-watt amplifier; DVD player and screen w/ wireless headsets; keyless entry; leather trimmed bucket seats, steering wheel and shift knob; 8-way power driver's seat; heated front seats; front lumbar supports; rear 60/40 folding seats; tilt/telescope steering wheel; power windows; power adjustable pedals; power sunroof.