

Grace, Class, Rap and Rolling Thunder:

The All-in-One Chrysler 300 C

By Roger Witherspoon

It's rare when a car designer – a professional with unlimited Crayons, tons of modeling clay, and a rolling assembly line with tons of molded metal – stops, chokes up, and is at a loss for words over one particular creation.

But that is precisely what happens if you ask Ralph Gilles, the talented African American who heads Daimler Chrysler's creative Studio 3, about his first sight of the Chrysler 300C, the car he and his staff hoped would rejuvenate the company and lead the way to a new era in Chrysler styling.

Gilles' studio had scored hits with the Dodge Magnum, a hot rod with a 340-horsepower Hemi engine masquerading as a family station wagon; and the Dodge Charger, the hemi-powered four-door descendent of the Runnin' Rebel popularized in the 1970s by the TV show the Dukes of Hazard. And they led the track with the 200-mile-an-hour, 500-horsepower *Dodge Viper*.

Studio 3 breathed new life in to the Jeep Liberty, and turned the sedate Jeep Grand Cherokee into an off-road hot rod with a 420-horsepower Hemi engine capable of pushing it to 155 miles an hour.

But the move to Chrysler was different. "Dodge is a mainstream brand with an attitude," explained Gilles. "But Chrysler is more aspirational, more graceful with more high-end products. We're going to a premium market where the main competitors will be Volvos, Audis and other imports."

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The first sight of the Chrysler 300 is dominated by the high, stately grill vaguely reminiscent of the front of the Bentley that evokes an instant expectation of luxury, comfort, power and performance. This is not an accident. "Honestly," admitted Gilles, "I've been a closet worshiper of Bentley."

In many ways, the Chrysler 300 delivers on its promise. Flowing from the grill is a wide, sleek, powerful-looking, head-turning vehicle from the 18-inch wheels to the

squared-off trunk. The profile of the slightly curved roof line is broken only by the black satellite antennae.

The 300 was an instant hit. Corporate execs wanted it. Limousine services wanted it. Snoop Dogg called Chrysler and offered to promote it if he could get one in all black – which is what he is now tooling around in.

“We were surprised at the reception the car received,” said Gilles. “It wasn’t surprising that it did well, but we were more surprised at the broad demographic range of people who were attracted to it and bought it. There was just a nice, even spread: male and female, white and black, older and younger.

“I thought we would go for the traditional Chrysler buyer and there would be some conquest from people who would normally gravitate to Cadillac and Lincoln. But it offers something for everybody and that’s why it is so successful.”

Inside, the 300 is more spacious than it looks. The ceiling is not divided into front and rear sections separated by a ceiling light in the middle. Instead, there are courtesy reading lights over each rear door discreetly mounted inside the access handle. It is an optical illusion, but that slight change in lighting adds to an impression of space.

The interior is two-toned, with leather seats and burnished wood trim for the door handles. The steering wheel, which tilts and telescopes, is a mix of leather and wood and the audio controls are conveniently mounted on the spokes. Wood also accents the gearshift. The leather seats are wide, deep, adjustable and comfortable. The front set can be heated, with two settings, and there are split front climate controls so the driver and passenger can find their own comfort zones.

The rear seats comfortably held my NFL and NBA-sized colleagues. In addition, these seats fold down in a 60/40 split, enlarging a trunk which is already big enough to hold a couple of Tony Soprano’s unfortunate enemies. A movable mesh gate in the trunk will keep the bodies – or a load of groceries – from sliding around.

The entertainment and information center is set in the dash in a pewter setting with a stately analog clock. The 3 x 5-inch screen which is easy to read has a built-in digital timepiece for younger motorists. The 300 comes with AM/FM and Sirius satellite radio and a six-disc, in-dash CD changer. The audio system has six speakers whose bass reverberates throughout the neighborhood. There are 12 preset positions to divide between the three different radio settings.

In addition to music, the top of the center console folds out to provide another screen so the rear passengers can watch a DVD movie which they hear through wireless headsets. The console also has a holder for cell phones, power outlets for cell chargers or laptops, and cup holders which safely keep bottled water or a large Starbucks coffee cup from tipping over. There is also a navigation system which is easy to use, though not detailed enough to pick out individual city streets.

But the Chrysler 300 C is not intended to just look good. After all, Gilles’ passion is street racing. Underneath, the 300 and the Dodge Charger are the same care, sharing a 5.7-liter Hemi V-8 engine producing 340 horsepower and capable of pushing the car from 0 – 60 miles an hour in six seconds. It comes with a five-speed automatic transmission, but has an electronic clutch if you choose to shift into manual mode.

On the road, if you don’t want to be sedate, the Chrysler 300 can go anywhere, anytime. During a New England rain storm – the kind where the raindrops are slicing horizontally in a blinding sheet and the wide, interstate highway is suddenly coated with

two inches of water – the 300 held the road as if it were cruising on a sunny Sunday afternoon. The only acknowledgement of the deteriorating road conditions was the occasional flickering light on the dash signaling that the all wheel drive and electronic stability program were selectively damping a wheel to prevent skidding. On bad surfaces, the Chrysler 300 handles like a jeep – only smoother.

On an open, sun-drenched road the 300 is a racer. Hit the pedal and the Hemi quickly roars to life, pushing you back into the leather seats as it pushes the speedometer well into the triple digits, turning the countryside into a quiet, comfortable, exhilarating blur.

No wonder Snoop was smitten.

2006 Chrysler 300-C AWD

MSRP:		\$40,030
EPA Mileage:	17 MPG City	24 MPG Highway
As Tested Mileage:		14 MPG Mixed

Power/ Safety:

5.7 Liter Hemi Multi Displacement, fuel-injected V-8 engine producing 340 horsepower and 390 pound-feet of torque; 5-speed automatic transmission; Brake assist; all-speed traction control; electronic stability program; performance anti-lock 4-wheel disc brakes; power rack –and-pinion steering; 4-wheel independent touring suspension; front and rear solar-control glass; rear door child protection locks; front advanced multistage air bags; side curtain air bags; rain-sensitive windshield wipers; fog lamps; 18-inch aluminum wheels.

Interior/ Comfort:

AM/FM Sirius satellite digital radio; 6-disc, in dash changer and six Boston Acoustic speakers; power, heated front seats; front and rear climate control outlets; GPS navigation system; tilt, telescope steering wheel with fingertip audio controls; outside temperature and compass display; rear seat DVD system.