



Fast, Furious, and a Fine Ride

By Roger Witherspoon

I knew it wasn't a legal parking spot, but was still surprised as the policemen approached.

I had pulled up in front of a Starbucks to drop off a friend and was sitting behind the wheel as the officers separated, approaching from each side. The officer said, almost apologetically, "This is beautiful. If it isn't too much trouble, could I see under the hood?"

That happens a lot with the new Chevy Camaro, a beautifully designed, modern classic of the American muscle car which instantly transports older views back to the 60s and 70s and leaves smiles in its wake. In this case, it is an updated version of the '69 yellow Camaro which Ed Welburn, GM's design chief, tools around in to relax. Welburn is fortunate, of course, to have GM's private track where he can blow off steam at 155 miles per hour without worrying about speed traps or traffic.



But for the rest of us, it helps to find a quiet stretch of highway like those in rural Connecticut, where the wind is blowing softly off the Long Island Sound, the hawks are circling lazily overhead and, for a couple of miles, there is nothing in front of the leather steering wheel but the two broad stripes down the front of the sloping hood. Under that hood was a V-8 engine borrowed from the Corvettes and capable of cranking out 426 horsepower on command. But at that moment, it was under the summer sun in wait and rumble mode.

The original Camaro came out at the end of the 60s, a time when a young guitarist named Jimi Hendrix was hired to play for a New Jersey R&B group of balladeers known as the Isley Brothers, and introduced a wildly electronic sound which pushed the genre into totally new directions.

So I popped their vintage *Go for Your Guns* album into the single disc, CD player, flipped to “Fight the Power”, cranked up the 245-watt Boston Acoustic surround sound till the 9-inch speakers in the doors had the cabin shaking, and floored the accelerator. What had been a low hum from the twin, steel-tipped exhausts became a low roar and as the 20-inch rear wheels dug in and the 2010 version of the Camaro shot down the highway, with the speedometer spinning past 60 in under five seconds en route to 125. It could go faster, but that’s my limit on Uncle Sam’s roads if there is a curve ahead.

The windows on the Camaro are slim, which has the simultaneous effect of letting little wind inside the aerodynamic shell to either interfere with the sound system or cool the cabin. When the summer sun is high, the air conditioner is needed.



But this was a clear July morning following a night of heavy rain and the air was summer mild and clean as the Camaro raced past the salt water marshes and approached a wide turn. The car’s 6-speed transmission was in manual mode, and I tapped the paddle shift down to 5th gear and entered the curve at 110. The racing tires gripped the road more tightly than my college grad daughter held onto her first adult paycheck, and there was no shimmy or slide as the Camaro soared around the curve and again was on the straight and level asphalt. I tapped the shift again and, with scarcely a nudge of the accelerator, was back to 125 and racing.

I slowed at the first overpass, about three miles down the road – and wanted more. So I made the U-turn, popped out the Isleys, slid Eminem’s *8-Mile* into the player, heard him ask “*If you had one shot, would you catch it, or let it slip?*”

And I floored the accelerator, and did it again – 10 MPH faster.

For a car company that has just come back from the brink of extinction with a mantra to design lean, fuel efficient, desirable vehicles, Welburn has started the climb to automotive respectability with a modestly fuel efficient sports car that far exceeds expectations. The 2010 Camaro comes in three flavors and the Camaro SS – the top of the line, road racing model – sips premium gasoline at a 14.5 miles per gallon rate in the real world, though the EPA’s static tests results say the car can run 16 city miles and 25 country miles on a gallon of gas. The LT and LS versions of the Camaro have V-6 engines which drink regular gas as about 18 MPG in mixed driving – a bit shy of the EPA rate of 18 MPG in city driving and 29 MPG on the highway.

Outside, Welburn has dropped the roof line and thinned the windows considerably, while widening and lowering the car’s panther-like stance. The side-by-side effect is that of a younger, leaner, stronger, meaner offspring taking over the road.



It easily passes the head-turning test. Adult strangers ask if they can rub their hands over its undulating frame. Young boys point and shout “Bumblebee!” the name of the Camaro in the *Transformers* movie.

The LT model is available with a custom exterior which has 21-inch painted silver wheels and, if anything, a leaner, meaner look than its faster sibling. The look is not cheap: the loaded SS model costs \$36,000 while the mag-wheeled LT rolls in at \$38,500.

If the outside of all Camaro models live up to the hype, and the engine of the Camaro SS delivers the desired sports car thrill, the interior is that of a well appointed sport sedan. The Camaro’s two-tone leather motif is broken by use of the same color of exterior fiberglass coating around the inner doors and dash, bringing both consistency and excitement inside. At night, there are soft blue lights outline the trim.



The bucket seats are leather, and the front pair may be heated. There is some leg room in the rear, and the seats fold down to enlarge the already ample trunk. But while a teenager or small adult can fit in the rear seats, they are more for show than long distance or family use.

The dash is divided, with the speedometer and gas gauges behind the leather steering wheel, while the primary race-related gauges are found in the front of the center console. That's slightly below the line of sight, but they are still easy to see while driving.



For noise, there is AM/FM and XM satellite radio as well as the CD player and USB port or auxiliary connection. They have also provided OnStar, GM's satellite communications system which can provide both cell phone calls and turn-by-turn directions.

If there are drawbacks to the new Camaro, there are two: it is a gas guzzler, and the windows are small. The windows' sight lines are problematic. The small windows on the sides and rear, coupled with and high wheel hips means there are large blind spots on either side of the car's humped rear. One has to be extra cautious when backing up, especially in parking lots. In addition, unless you spring for a \$900 sun roof, the car is a summer heat sink, requiring a lot more use of air conditioning than normal.

But those are relatively minor.

For those old enough to remember the '60s, the Camaro is a fast moving blast from the past. For those of later generations, it's a example of how GM can still build a great sports car.



2010 Chevrolet Camaro SS Coupe

MSRP:		\$36,260
EPA Mileage:	16 MPG City	25 MPG Highway
As Tested Mileage:		14.7 MPG Mixed
Gasoline		Premium

Performance/ Safety:		
Top Speed		155 MPH
0 – 60 MPH		4.7 Seconds
¼ Mile		13.2 Seconds at 105 mph

6.2-Liter cast aluminum DOHC V-8 engine producing 426 horsepower and 420 pound/feet of torque; sequential fuel injection; 6-speed automatic transmission with electronic manual mode and paddle shifts; rear wheel drive; remote vehicle starter; performance suspension; 4-piston Brembo performance brakes; rear spoiler; 20-inch painted aluminum wheels; stability and traction control; Halogen headlamps and fog lamps; stainless steel dual exhausts; dual stage frontal and side impact airbags; dual exhausts with stainless steel tips.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/ XM satellite radio; Boston Acoustics premium 9-speaker audio system; USB port; OnStar communications; Bluetooth cell phone connection; single disc CD player;

leather wrapped, tilt & telescope steering wheel with fingertip audio, cruise, and phone controls; sport bucket leather seats; heated front seats; power adjusted driver's seat; fold flat rear seat; door trim ambient lighting.

2010 Chevrolet Camaro 2LT Coupe

MSRP:		\$38,540
EPA Mileage	18 MPG City	29 MPG Highway
As Tested Mileage:		17.9 MPG Mixed
Gasoline:		Regular

Performance / Safety:		
	Top Speed	135 MPH
	0 – 60 MPH	6.1 Seconds

3.6-liter, cast aluminum, direct injection V-6 engine producing 304 horsepower and 273 pound/feet of torque; 6-speed automatic transmission with electronic manual mode with paddle shift; rear wheel drive; independent front and rear suspension; remote vehicle starter; 21-inch, silver polished wheels; rear spoiler; High Density headlamps; fog lamps.