

FLASHBACK: PRO STOCK WARRIORS OF THE '70s

Hemmings



# MUSCLE MACHINES

THE ULTIMATE ALL-AMERICAN PERFORMANCE CAR MAGAZINE

SAVING A

## SUPER DUTY



PRESERVING PONTIAC'S HOTTEST HOLD-OUT

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## 1973 Pontiac Trans Am SD-455

By Mike McNessor

Photography by Dino Petrocelli and Prestige Motor Car

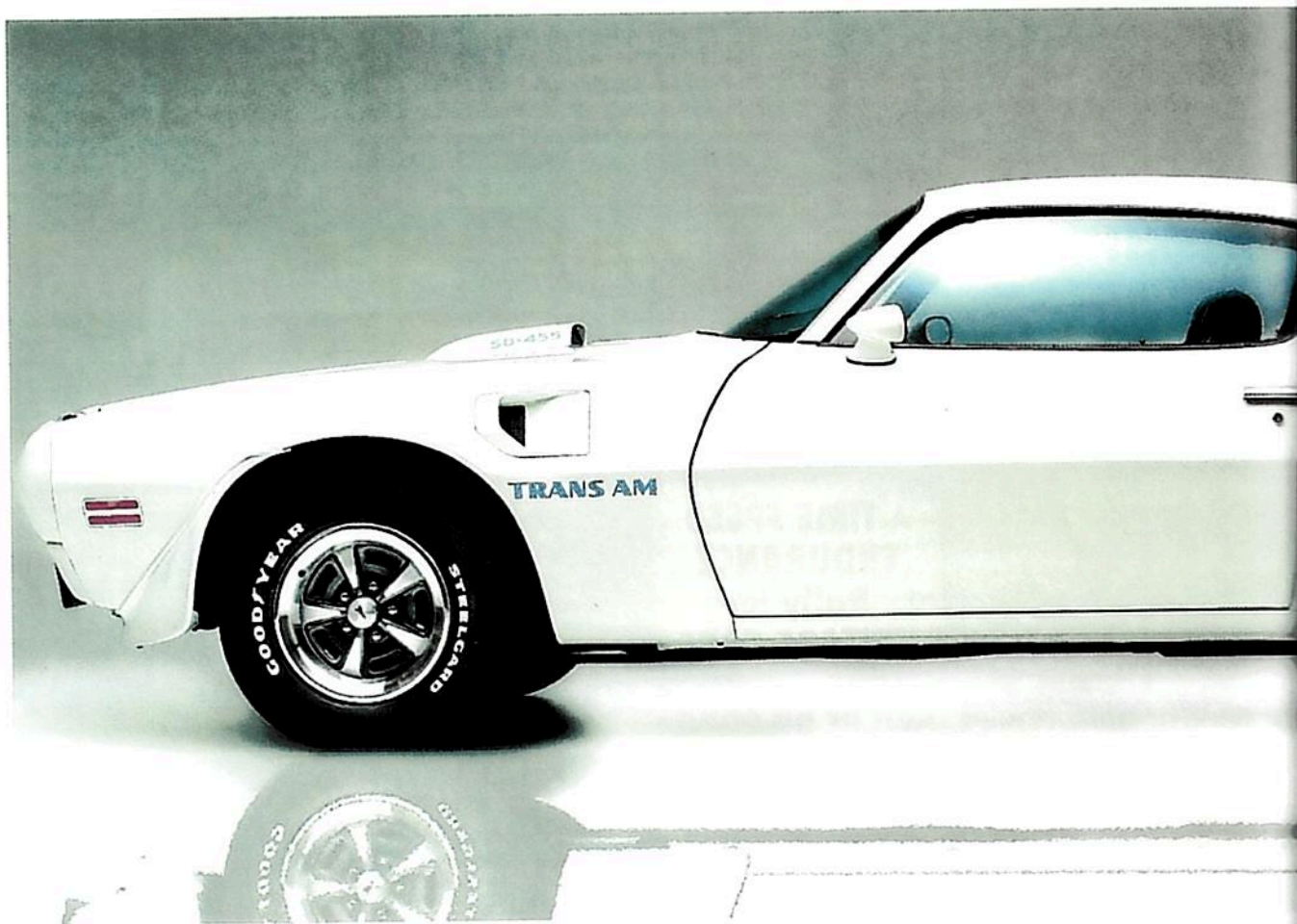
### Pontiac mavens will tell you

that their beloved company invented the muscle car. That's debatable (we look forward to your letters and emails). But there's little doubt that this is the Pontiac that brought muscle car era version 1.0 to a memorable close.

The 1973 Pontiac Trans Am SD-455 was the Hail Mary pass of all Hail Mary passes at a time when the federal government, OPEC and Big Insurance were bent on sacking the practice of bolting powerful V-8 engines into two-door cars that were festooned with fat stripes, racy badges or cartoon characters.

First edition Pontiac Trans Am SD-455s are rarely spotted in the wild today, which isn't surprising considering that just 252 were built for the 1973 model year. Of course, far fewer Super Duty 455-powered Trans Ams survived the ensuing four decades at the hands of enthusiastic owners, eager to test the car's 13-second quarter-mile capabilities and surprisingly good handling.

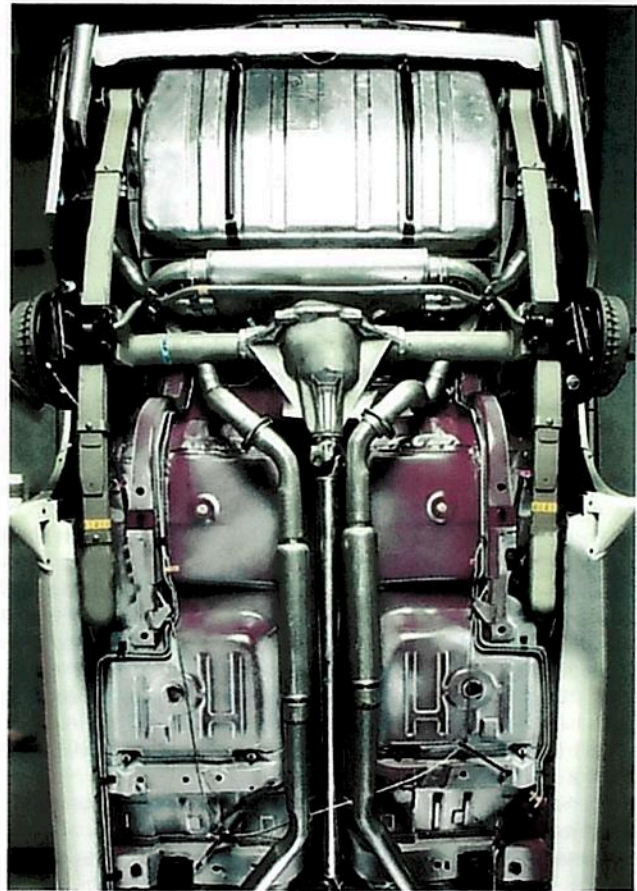
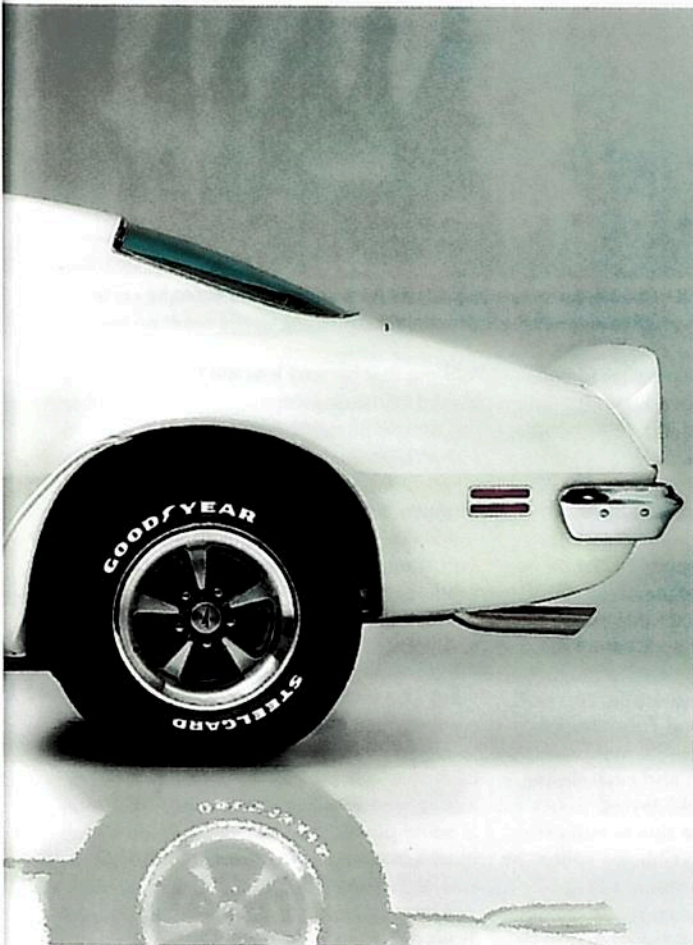
From a driver's perspective, you could do much worse. The second generation Trans Am could rival the third generation Corvette in the corners, and the SD-455 was a thinly disguised







The SD-455 was the last salvo fired in the losing battle to keep muscle cars available to the public in 1973. It was a thinly disguised race engine with even a provision for a dry sump oiling system cast into the block. Pictured post restoration, this SD-455 remained with one owner for 40 years.



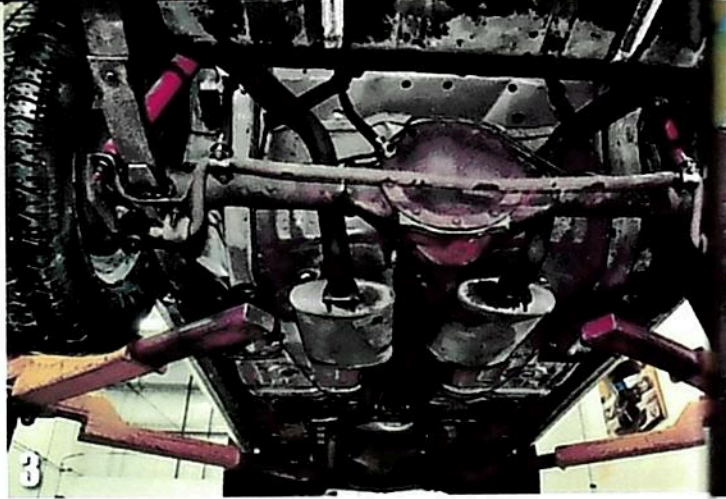
Great pains were taken during this Trans Am's restoration to replicate factory overspray. The red "primer" is actually urethane paint.



# RESTORATION PROFILE



The Trans Am still wore a set of Georgia tags when it was picked up in South Carolina. The car was very complete but in need of restoration.



The entire car was scrubbed clean of four decades worth of road grime, and reference photos were taken to aid in its reassembly.



The alternator was the only engine accessory that wasn't original when the restoration started, making this rare car even more desirable.



All of the hardware was bagged and labeled, then sent out to be reconditioned with the appropriate finish.

race engine: four-bolt mains, reinforced block, forged pistons, forged connecting rods, nitrided crankshaft, even a provision in the block for a dry sump oiling system. The SD-455's cylinder heads were a free-breathing design patterned after the howling Ram Air IV heads, and the cam was similar to the grind used in the Ram Air IV. But since leaded gas was out and stricter emissions laws were in, the SD-455 made do with 8.25:1 compression and .470-inch lift, versus the RA IV's 10.5:1 compression and .520 lift.

These cars are highly sought after today and difficult to locate with all of their original mechanicals and body panels intact. So when upstate New York-based restorer and dealer Joe Verrillo began a nationwide search two years ago for a '73 SD-455 T/A, little did he imagine that he'd wind up with two of these race-bred rarities at his shop.

The first Trans Am he purchased and left in largely as-found condition. It's for sale today at his dealership, Prestige Motor Car in Clifton Park, New York.

The second '73 SD-455 Trans Am he came across is this month's feature car. It was treated to the exhaustive restoration featured on these pages before being sent on to its new owner—a collector of concours-quality restored GM muscle cars who chooses to remain anonymous.

Both of the SD-455s, unrestored and restored, appeared in a special display of Super Duty Trans Am and Formula Firebirds at the 2013 Muscle Car and Corvette Nationals in November, and each drove off with a Concours Gold Award.

The original owner of this month's feature car was flown in to Chicago so that he could see the car's restoration firsthand.

"I emailed the former owner some photos of the car when we finished it, and he

told me that he sold it to me because he liked that it was going to be restored and put into a collection," Joe said. "He also needed the money to keep his business afloat, but unfortunately he went out of business last year."

When Prestige started with the Trans Am, it was a one-owner, Southern car, solid as second generation F-bodies go, but in well-used condition.

"I flew to South Carolina and went to the owner's place," Joe said. "The car was worn and tired, but complete. It had been painted once in its life, a set of aftermarket speakers were about the only deviation from stock inside. All the flares, as well as the front spoiler, were missing because at some point the owner had run over a blown-out tractor trailer tire on the highway and damaged them."

The original owner bought the SD Trans Am from King Pontiac in Gaith-



## 1973 PONTIAC TRANS AM SD-455



**5** The Trans Am's body was stripped of its paint using chemical stripper. A one-owner Southern car, it was rusted in only a few of the typical spots.



**7** The goal was to keep all of the sheetmetal original to the car, so sections were welded in like this repair panel behind the rear wheel.



**6** All of the chassis hard parts were media blasted, then finished with modern urethane primer and paint replicating the original colors.



**8** The body shell was primed and block sanded multiple times before it was ready to paint: about 480 labor hours from stripping to painting.

ersburg, Maryland, for \$5,135.76—a substantial amount of money in 1973, but the Super Duty engine option alone accounted for \$521 of the MSRP. He'd kept all of the original dealer invoices as well as receipts for any work performed over the Trans Am's 40-year history, which obviously makes the car more desirable to collectors today.

"Finding a one-owner car with all the original paperwork, along with the fact that it was so complete, made it appealing, so we purchased it," Joe said.

The Trans Am was hauled back to New York where Prestige began by cleaning it and taking note of all of the chassis marks, paint dabs, and overspray patterns that would be replicated later.

"We took a lot of time cleaning, using oven cleaner, degreaser and a hot water washer," Joe said. "Then took plenty of pictures and used them as our guide later on."

Next, the car was stripped to bare metal using chemical stripper, which revealed some of the trouble areas in the sheetmetal that would be addressed.

"The quarter panels had rust on both sides," Joe said. "We fixed both quarters by cutting pieces out of other panels and repairing the rust, rather than removing the original quarters from the car."

After the quarters were repaired, the team at Prestige stripped off the rest of the body panels, removed the drivetrain and suspension and mounted the shell on a rotisserie.

"The original front bumper was stripped and repaired, and we found an NOS decklid. Other than that, all of the body panels are original to the car."

The body and panels were primed and block-sanded in three sessions until it was all arrow straight, then all of the sheetmetal was sealed and sprayed with DuPont

ChromaPremier base coat/clear coat urethane. All of the areas that would've originally been painted in a satin black—chassis components, front inner fenders, radiator support, etc.—were sprayed with a low-gloss urethane.

While the body was undergoing about 480 hours of repair and refinishing, all of the hardware was sent out to be replated in the appropriate finishes, the engine was rebuilt out-of-house to stock specs, as was the original automatic transmission, carburetor and accessories.

The client for whom Prestige was restoring the car, however, decided that he wanted a four-speed SD-455 Trans Am, of which only 72 were produced in 1973. So, the rebuilt automatic transmission and all of its related components were boxed up for storage, and a date-correct Muncie four-speed was located, as were an original shifter, pedals, etc.

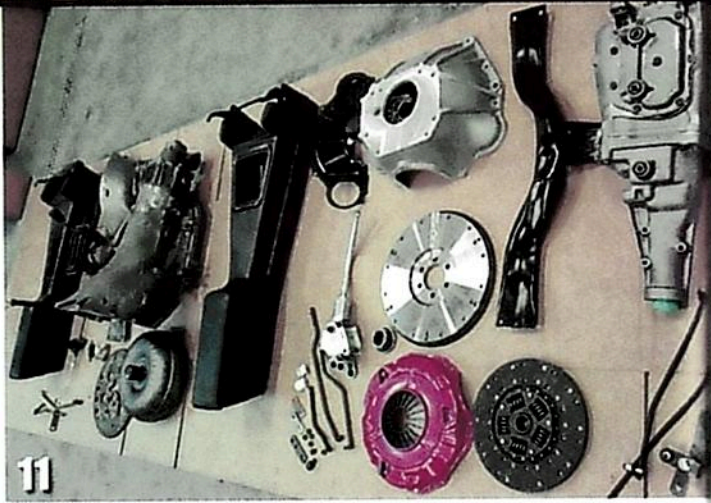


# RESTORATION PROFILE



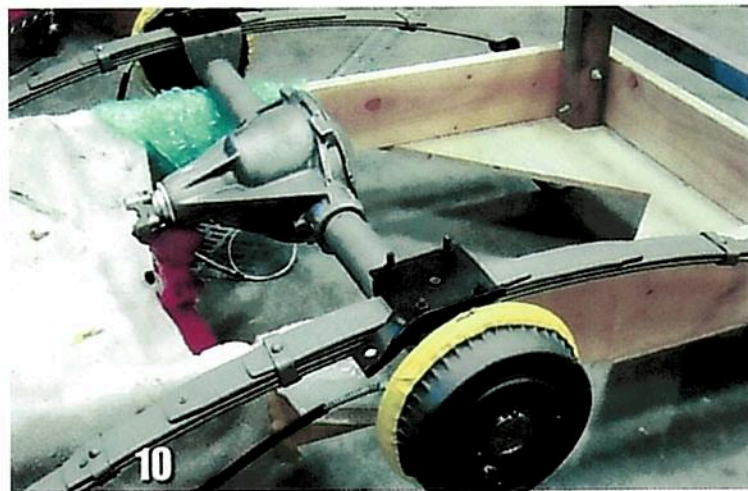
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The factory Rally II wheels were stripped, then refinished in the correct factory colors, before being shod with Goodyear Steelgard radials.



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A new console, a date-correct Muncie four-speed, plus a bell housing, clutch, flywheel and shifter were ordered up to convert the Trans Am to manual shift.



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The axle, brakes and leaf springs were restored separately and then reassembled and replaced as an assembly.



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Inside, new carpeting, headliner and upholstery as well as new correct glass were installed.

"The car was an automatic, but my client wanted a four-speed," Joe said. "So I hunted up a correct transmission with the correct numbers, as well as an original shifter. We bought new pedals and installed all of the switch gear to make sure that it functioned exactly like a factory four-speed car."

The Trans Am's black interior was reassembled using a mix of reconditioned original pieces and new components from PUI Interiors.

"The dash is original, and the door panels are original, but we replaced the seat covers, the carpet and the headliner," Joe explained. "The seat belts were also taken out and restored to new condition."

All of the car's glass was replaced during the reassembly, as were the fuel and brake lines, the gas tank, rear brake hardware, exhaust system and high-wear chassis items. The completed car is museum quality, finished to a degree that borders on obsessive.

"I'm thrilled with the work we did," Joe said. "Very happy. We spend so much time detailing the undercarriage and engine compartment of these cars when we restore them—it's so much work. But with the value of many of these cars as high as it is, you strive to make them perfect." 🍀



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Body, subframe, rear axle and rear suspension were reunited on a two-post lift; front sheetmetal was then set on to check panel alignment.



## 1973 PONTIAC TRANS AM SD-455



Purists may grumble, but the pedals and shifter look factory and make the Trans Am more fun to drive. Odometer shows just over seven miles, having been reset during the car's extensive restoration. Hopefully the new owner will fill in a few more of those zeros.



Replated taillamp trim and bumper highlight the rear. A factory-style replacement exhaust system with resonators and a transverse dual outlet 70-15 muffler was installed, as was a new fuel tank.



The full-size spare wheel still wears its original vintage Uniroyal tire. Rally II wheels with bright trim rings look sharp with period-correct GR70-15s.