

FIRST LOVE

Why build your second or third hot rod when you're still in love with your first? Dave Dowler and his '67 Cougar seem to be a marriage made in heaven.

By John Schwartze • Photography by Johnny Hunkins

Some "firsts" are an important step in life; they're things you never forget. Whether it's a first kiss, a first job, or a first house, they're a rite of passage that cause you to say to yourself: "I finally did it." Sometimes they turn into a long-term thing, like marrying your high school sweetheart. Dave Dowler didn't marry his high school sweetheart, but he recently renewed his vows to one of the most important firsts of his life—his first car.

Flashback to 1979, and a 17-year-old Dave was searching for his initial means of transportation. Through a friendship



with a man at a local tow yard, Dave got wind of a '67 Cougar GT that remained unclaimed for a while, and was now available. Dave didn't consider himself a



diehard Cougar fan at the time, but perhaps that old commercial with the live cougar jumping inside the engine bay was ingrained in his subconscious during childhood. Through some resourceful bartering at the impound yard, Dave

"Constantly hearing co-workers talking about their cars got the creative juice flowing. It made me realize I needed to bring the car back to life."—Dave Dowler





While we're on the subject of firsts, here's a bit of trivia. The Cougar won *Motor Trend's* "Car of the Year" award for 1967—the first in Mercury's history.

made the car his own, and so the long journey began.

Not being privy to automotive maintenance back then, Dave learned the fundamentals right from the get-go. Dave: "The very first thing I had to do when I brought it home was change a leaky freeze plug all by myself." While many people would have been put off by the constant tweaks of an old car, Dave found that it fit his scientific nature. "The original Holley 650 was in bad shape, there was a leak in the back bowl, and I eventually replaced it with a two-barrel. The leaf springs squeaked like crazy and became the signature sound of my car. The more I worked on it though, the more I wanted it around. With that 390 FE big-block, it really moved. It had everything a high school

guy needed in a car," Dave recalls.

As time passed and the tyrannical California vehicle codes took an increasingly large bite out of the Cougar, Dave reluctantly drove the car less and less. Being a young guy just starting a career, he acquiesced to buying more eco-friendly cars and the Cougar went from being the primary car to the secondary car, and ultimately, the backup car. After 1996, the car was too far gone to repeat the ritual of revitalizing it when his daily drivers let him down. One of the rear brakes was frozen, the tranny was shot, and the cat was put into hibernation indefinitely.

During the Cougar's sabbatical, Dave went on to enjoy a career in electrical engineering. Through total happenstance (or was it fate?), he got into the



automotive end of the industry. Dave began developing fuel injection systems and worked with Ken Farrell, who went on to co-found RetroTek Speed, and who would play an instrumental role in resurrecting the Cougar. The culmination of people offering to buy the parked Cougar from time to time, the Ford versus Chevy rivalry that went on at work, and having a friend who became a savvy car builder made Dave realize his next course of action. It was time to let the cat out of the bag.

Dave turned to his old buddy Ken to spearhead the effort of what started out as a stock rebuild, and had it towed to his shop in Corona, California. "The car looked like it'd just been pulled out of the ocean when we started on

"The car looked like it'd just been pulled out of the ocean when we started on it."

—Ken Farrell, lead builder



it," says Ken. While the tired 390 was sent out for machine work as well as the C6 for a complete overhaul, the bodywork began. The panels behind the rear windows, trunk, and roof were very rotted, and parts from a '67 Mustang had to be grafted in their place. Upon completing the media blasting, welding, and sanding, the car was ready for paint, and Dave knew exactly what he wanted. Instead of keeping the stock pea soup green, Dave chose another Ford



At first, you might think this throttle body is a regular double-pumper, but it's actually the Powerjection 1 system that Dave and Ken helped pioneer. This retro-styled injection system, which is sold through Professional Products, also just picked up a SEMA award for best-engineered new product.

color called Vista Blue. "Ken had suggested adding black rally stripes, and I mocked it up to see how it would look. After seeing it, I knew that was the way to go," says Dave. Dave also found a cowl induction hood from Mustangs Unlimited to replace the stock one.

The non-stock mods didn't stop there. The price of rebuilding the suspension wasn't too far off from an

aftermarket Mustang II kit. This was a point of no return for Dave because once he put it in, there was no undoing it. The inherent benefit of more engine clearance, adjustable coilovers, and power rack-and-pinion was just too sexy to pass up, so Dave gave Ken the green light on cutting out the stock shock towers and making the transformation.





After the block returned from machining with the bores punched .030 over, it was decided that it would be dressed with more modern components. Aside from going with a lighter set of Edelbrock Performer RPM FE heads, an Edelbrock Performer RPM cam, and Keith Black slugs, things started to get more unconventional (and for good reason). Though it was a departure from stock, the decision to go with fuel injection was an obvious choice. "This was the system that I worked with Ken on to help

design and write programming for. I also liked that it looked so close to the original Holley," says Dave. The ease of installation, its self-learning computer, and auto adjusting air/fuel ratio made it ideal for Dave's practical street cruising intentions.

The other cool mods Dave made to keep the factory look, but improve functionality, reiterate why this car seems to be his soul mate. The stock sequential turn signals were upgraded by Dave using a counter and MOSFETS, and later converted to LED's



Not much out of the ordinary here, and that's the way Dave likes it. The woodgrained Grant wheel looks like a beautifully modernized version of the original woodgrained wheel that came in the XR-7 models.



"I'd envisioned the car in this color for over 20 years. Seeing it in person was like seeing your girlfriend in the dress you like the most."—Dave Dowler

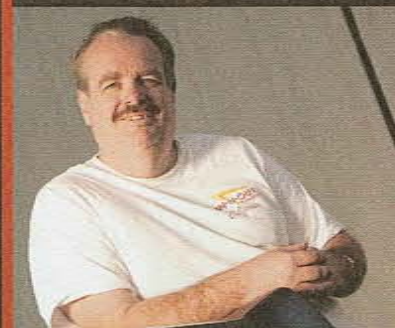
after he found a kit on MustangProject.com. The vacuum-operated headlight covers were another feature that made the car unique, which Dave wanted to modernize. "I assumed there had to be someone else out there who hated the ugly plumbing and constant leaks of the stock system as much as I did," Dave opines. Once again, fate intervened and Dave found an article on Classic Cougar Network that showed how to convert the system to an electric one using motors from a Ford Probe.

Dave wanted to keep the '60s feel of the exterior and interior, and with the exception of reupholstering the driver seat and upgrading the dash cluster with Auto Meter gauges and a Grant steering wheel, the cockpit is all original. "It all looks and feels familiar like it did back in high school. The gauges look like they belong there and were made for the car," he says. Even the addition of a passenger-side mirror (which wasn't a stock feature) blends right in.

With a fortuitous completion date of Valentine's Day of 2008, Dave was ready to light up his Cougar for the first time in over 10 years. "It wasn't the same car; everything was better. It was more of a beast, had a bigger lope, was louder, and had much more responsive handling. I don't regret anything that we did to make the upgrades," Dave proudly confirms. Like watching your favorite movie in high def and listening to it with surround sound, the car has the best of everything—performance, nostalgia, and style. "You never get another first car, right?" Dave asks rhetorically. You sure don't Dave, and the rekindling of this relationship would make any hopeless romantic blush. **PHR**



You could argue the Foose Nitrous series wheels look like claws, and complement the Cougar's name and aesthetics as if they were made for the car.



BY THE NUMBERS

'67 MERCURY COUGAR GT

Dave Dowler, 45 • Santa Maria, CA
Total cost to build: approximately \$19,500

ENGINE

Type:.....stock Ford 390ci
Block:.....Ford 390 FE, bored to 4.08
Rotating assembly:.....Keith Black 10.5:1 pistons, stock Ford crank, Ford I-beam connecting rods, machine work by Carl's Machine, Corona, CA
Cylinder heads:.....Edelbrock Performer RPM FE, 2.19/1.73-inch valves and 72cc chambers
Camshaft:.....Edelbrock Performer RPM, 236/236 at .050, .572/.572-inch lift, 108-degree LSA
Valvetrain:.....remanufactured factory rockers, Edelbrock valvesprings and hydraulic lifters
Induction:.....Edelbrock RPM intake manifold, RetroTek 750-cfm Powerjection 1 fuel injection
Ignition:.....Summit distributor, MSD 6AL ignition box, MSD plug wires
Fuel system:.....aftermarket '67 Mustang fuel tank, Professional Products fuel pump
Exhaust:.....Tri-Y headers, Summit 2.5-inch exhaust kit
Cooling:.....Thru-Cool radiator, custom shroud, mechanical flex fan
Oiling:.....Milodon pan, shortened 1.5 inches
Built by:.....Ken Farrell

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission:.....stock C6 transmission, Continental 10-inch 2,800-stall converter
Rear axle:.....stock 9-inch upgraded with Powertrax posi, 3.00:1 gears, stock axles, KYB shocks
Built by:.....Riverside Transmissions

CHASSIS

Front suspension:.....Autoworks International Mustang II
Rear suspension:.....stock, rebuilt
Brakes:.....Mustang 11-inch discs

WHEELS & TIRES

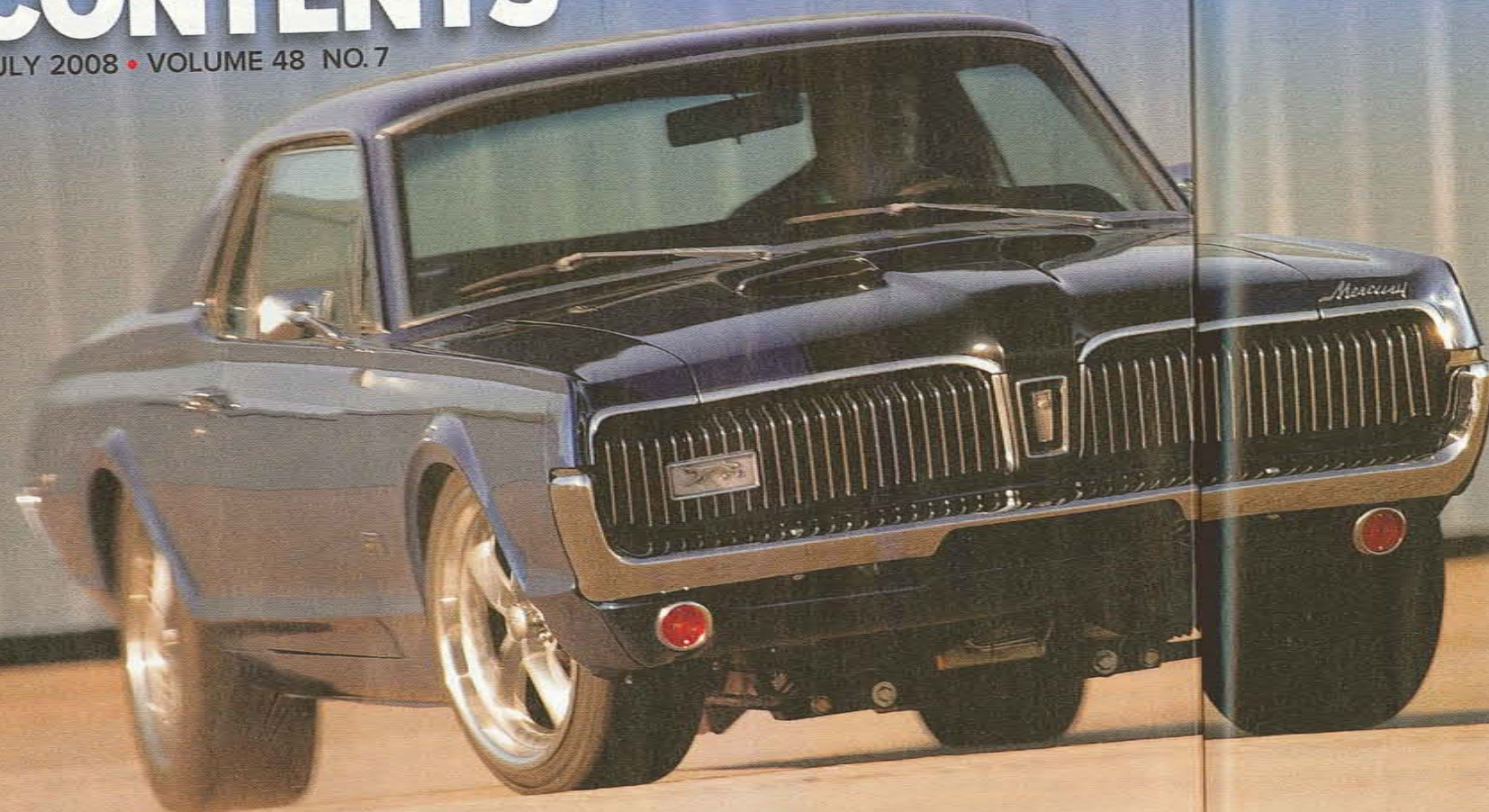
Wheels:.....Foose Nitrous 18x8 front and rear
Tires:.....Nexen 225/402R18, front; 255/452R18, rear

Thanks:.....Ken Farrell, Choice Autobody, RetroTek Speed



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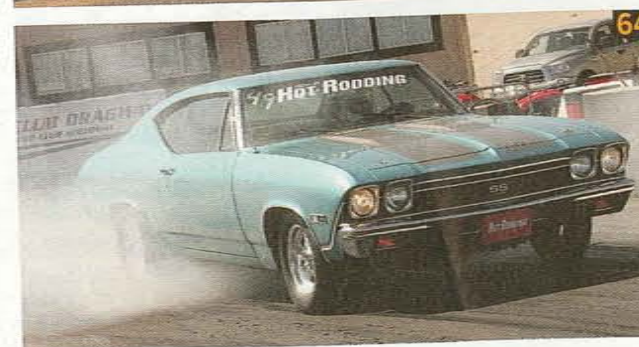
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ON THE COVER

Air Ride Technologies' '70 Chevelle is the star of this issue and you can win it at the Goodguys PPG Nationals in Columbus, Ohio, July 11-13. Steven Rupp captured the Chevy's burnout, while Stephen Kim shot the inset image of Mark Smith's '70 GTO.

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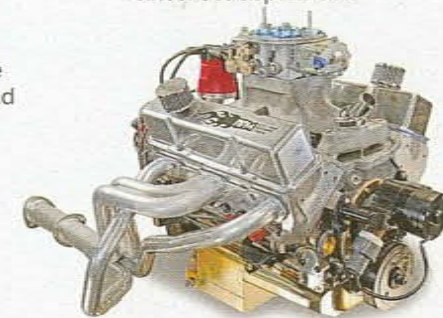
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