



# The demise of **CHEAP** and **FAST**

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU SAW A V8 GREMLIN OR 440-POWERED CHRYSLER THAT WAS READY TO ROCK FOR A FEW HUNDRED BUCKS?

**“B**ang for the buck.” That’s a term that gets thrown around a lot in the car world. But seriously, can a new \$30,000 disposable car really offer it? Maybe. But as a guy who started buying cool cars in the early 1980s with paper-route money, I really have to wonder: When did cheap, fast, so-dorky-they-are-cool cars become extinct?

I know a lot of today’s car collectors grew up in the ’70s and ’80s as well, and most likely there was a car early on that shaped our collecting tastes. As a teenager, I was lucky enough to work in one of those classic hole-in-the-wall garages that fixed old cars. There was always a parade of cool stuff coming through the door — in that garage I was safe from the onslaught of Rabbits, Starlets, and K-cars and surrounded by ’50s, ’60s, and early ’70s cars. Sure, we were using chicken wire and Tiger Hair body filler (the long strands of fiberglass and “waterproof” material were thought to be far superior to Bondo) to make new quarter panels, but regardless of how beat-up or rusty they were, the cars were still cool. And because they were worth basically nothing, nobody was afraid to have fun with them.

The true muscle cars were still “pricey,” the best of them almost \$5,000 — insanity! So those of us with severely limited budgets would scour want ads and side streets for our version of “bang for the buck” cars. In my case, I was trying to save my \$900 MGB from the ravages of our Midwest winters, so I needed a proper winter beater annually.

## 125 mph for cents on the dollar

My favorite was my 1966 Chrysler New Yorker sedan — yes, the cheapie with the door posts, not even a true hard top. But it was a first-year 440-ci powered version with a four-barrel AFB carb and 727 Torqueflite. Its red interior was pristine, and its body had been given the full weight-reduction program thanks to rust. The best part was that the 440 was an animal. I paid \$200 for the car, rigged up dual exhaust, tweaked the torsion-bar suspension, and put on a set of used Pirelli P-7s taken off a fancy Mercedes at the garage. Yes, I know, worst winter tires ever — but they were free. I also couldn’t resist adding black Le Mans stripes over the top and a big ol’ Sun Tach on the dash.

With its 2.73 rear gear, it had a top speed I still won’t mention for fear of jail time. I will say I was busted once from the air by a sheriff’s airplane. When the deputy on the ground pulled me over, I tried to get out of it by using the famous “it wasn’t me” defense teenagers have perfected over many generations. The deputy looked at me and said, “Kid, you’re saying there is another white Chrysler with racing stripes going 125 mph on this highway today?” Yep, I got the ticket.

Over the years, beaters came and went, but that ’66 New Yorker became my favorite. Fast, comfortable, and virtually bulletproof, I sold it a few times when I needed money and somehow it always found its way back. I think I owned it a total of four times, and eventually one of the people I sold it to decided it was worth more in scrap. I wish I still had it.

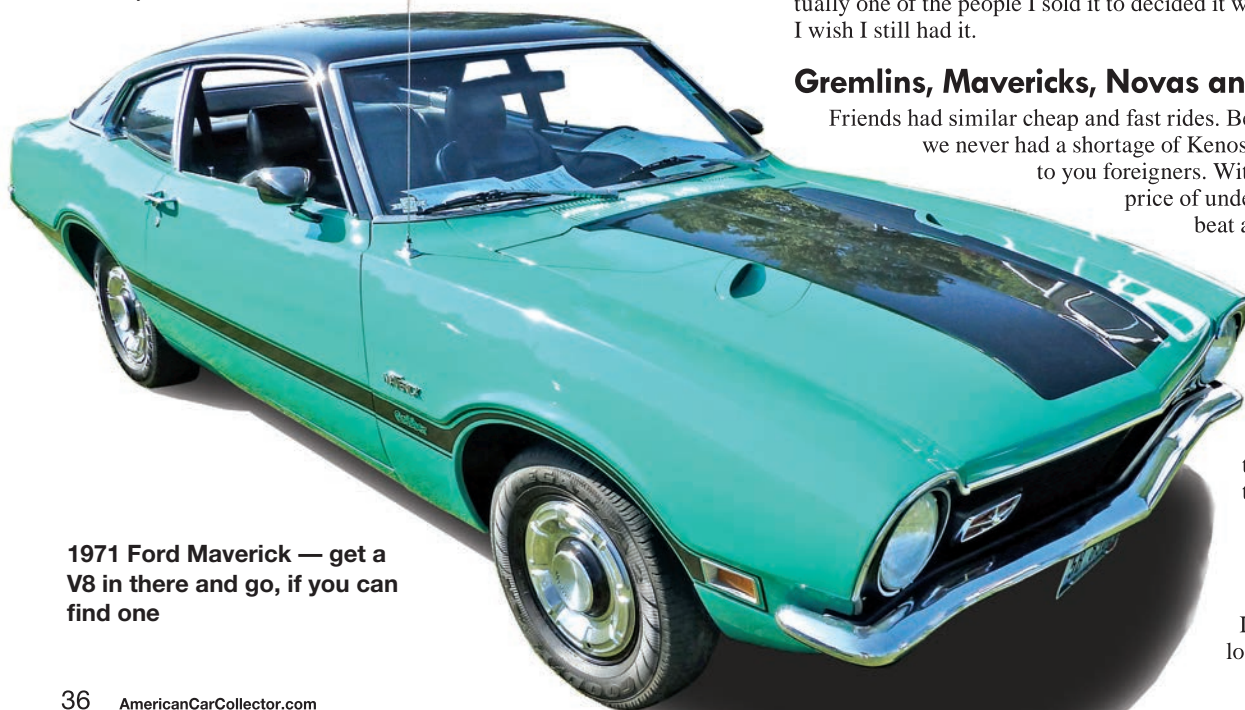
## Gremlins, Mavericks, Novas and rust buckets

Friends had similar cheap and fast rides. Being from Wisconsin, we never had a shortage of Kenosha Cadillacs — AMCs to you foreigners. With an average street price of under \$400, you couldn’t beat a V8 Gremlin. Hell,

even the 258-ci sixers were pretty stout.

I did watch one guy swear was faster in reverse than going forward get destroyed when it backed up into a telephone pole at extremely high speed. He may have been right.

How about Mavericks? With a 302 V8, they were potent. If you wanted to try to look cool in one you’d



1971 Ford Maverick — get a V8 in there and go, if you can find one

source a Grabber, but that carried with it the risk of being teased for driving something called, well, a Grabber. 1970s V8 Novas were a great choice also, if, of course, they weren't dog tracking too horribly. But that was usually an easy fix.

There were lots of other great choices as well. It almost seemed as if cheap and fast cars were everywhere, available at any moment for virtually nothing. Heck, even V8 Firebirds and Camaros were cheap if they weren't a T/A, Formula, SS, or Z/28.

One buddy bought a 440 Six Pack, 4-speed Road Runner for \$600 out in the country, and I was awfully jealous until I helped him open the trunk. There wasn't much trunk left. Or rear frame rails. Or leaf springs. The whole car was supported by a pair of coil-over shocks that looked like they came off an RV, and only the front part of the original leaf springs were there, used as a locating device for the rear axle. We ended up parting that rare muscle car out. I still have the air cleaner on a shelf somewhere.

### Dead or evolved?


Somehow, over the past 25 years, these cheap and fast cars have become extinct. When was the last time you saw a V8 Gremlin, or a big 440-powered Chrysler that was ready to rock for a few hundred bucks?

During the 1990s, it appeared that 1980s VW GTIs, 5.0 Mustangs, and Shelby Dodges had evolved into the cheap and fast cars of choice. Fine, I will admit it; I had an Omni GLH Turbo that I absolutely loved — and it was amazing in snow, too. But alas, I trust that it, too, has been returned to the earth, much to Lee Iacocca's disappointment, I'm sure.



1966 Chrysler New Yorker — an old favorite

So the big question is, which cheap cars are available now that have enough power and personality to hook tomorrow's car collectors? Are there fast and cheap, or even cheap and interesting, cars still out there? Do kids even care about 5.0 Mustangs or third-generation Camaros more than their iPhones or Facebook?

I want to know what you think — and I want to hear which cheap and fast car got YOU hooked. Drop me a line at [colin.comer@americancarcollector.com](mailto:colin.comer@americancarcollector.com). 

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