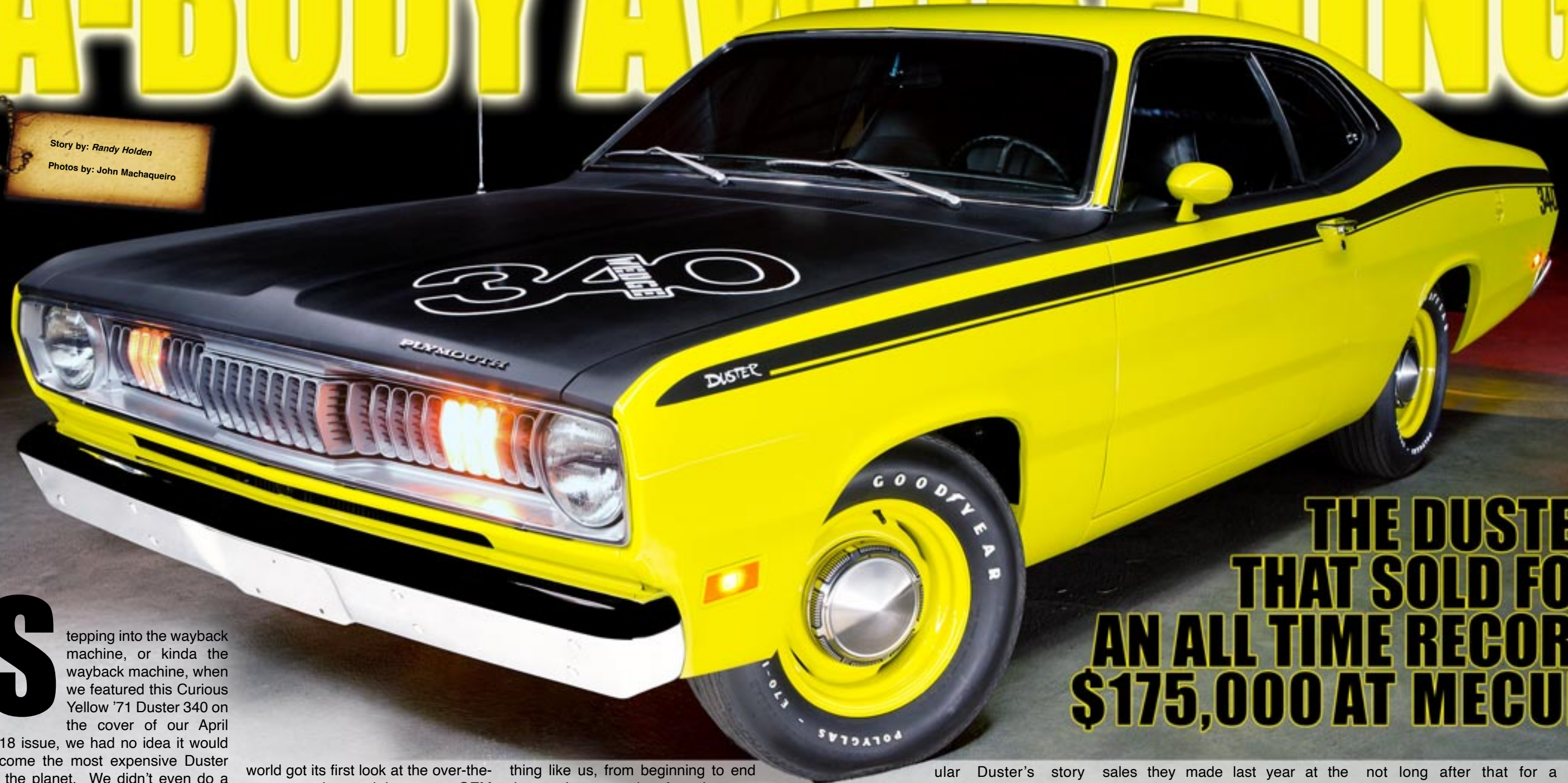


A-BODY AWAKENING

Story by: Randy Holden
Photos by: John Machaqueiro



**THE DUSTER
THAT SOLD FOR
AN ALL TIME RECORD
\$175,000 AT MECUM**

Stepping into the wayback machine, or kinda the wayback machine, when we featured this Curious Yellow '71 Duster 340 on the cover of our April 2018 issue, we had no idea it would become the most expensive Duster on the planet. We didn't even do a full feature on it in that issue, we simply ran a two-page photo of it on display at MCACN as part of noted restorer Mike Mancini and his American Muscle Car Restorations always impeccable work. The Duster had been recently finished before MCACN 2017, and that's where the

world got its first look at the over-the-top restoration, and the car got OEM Gold certification at that show, scoring 996 points out of 1,000 maximum points, its first time out. And that was the last we saw of the little Plymouth until it turned up for sale at the now famous, or infamous, 2024 Mecum Kissimmee auction. If you were any-

thing like us, from beginning to end the nearly two weeks of auction coverage on television and the interweb dealt blow after blow of stratospherically high prices. As 30+ year veterans of the big dog auctions, we've never seen anything like what happened in Florida last January. We're going about this partic-

ular Duster's story backwards this month, primarily because of what it did on the auction block, which had everyone's jaw on the floor. While everything at Mecum in Kissimmee went well above expectations, it was a seriously hot weekend for Plymouth Dusters, which may have been foreshadowed by two

sales they made last year at the same venue. At the 2023 Kissimmee sale, Mecum sold a nicely restored '71 Duster that was heavily optioned and Sassy Grass green for \$73,700, which set a record for a restored stock Duster, but that record didn't stand long, as they sold a very mixed up, driver-quality, 1970 Duster 340

not long after that for a record \$77,000, which was crazy money, given how many problems that car had; it was a '70 wearing a '71 front cap with the scoops and the cool grille, it had modern radial tires on it and it was sitting a mile in the air, indicating something had definitely been



done to the suspension. Atop that, the car was B5 blue, so it wasn't even the color that could be credited for it bringing such a hefty sum. The all-time reported record for a Duster sale was \$264,000 for the historic RTS (Rapid Transit System) show car from the late Steven Juliano's collection, which is quite understandable given it was a factory-ordered custom auto show car with a rich history and was perfectly restored by Roger Gibson. That car now resides in the Brothers Collection Museum in Oregon. Now, let's get down to Mecum Auctions in Florida for January 2024.

The sale saw a record crowd on hand, and despite some stormy weather, the place was packed. The sale was, as usual, loaded with Corvettes, the Ferraris grabbed insane prices and shattered records, but nobody expected what was coming with the Dusters. Among the first sold was what can at best be called a driver-quality local parking lot show 1970 Duster 340, which sold in-house

for \$56,000, or \$61,600 after you add in the buyer's premium. And that set the tone. A beautiful (but not heavily) optioned 1970 black-on-black 340 Duster wearing a serious OEM quality restoration sold out of the building to a phone or internet bidder, gaveling down at \$95,000, which then comes up to \$106,400 with the 12% buyer's premium for internet or phone bidders. As stunning as that was, a very sharp Panther Pink 1970 340 Duster, heavy on options, sold for \$90,000 which rang up to \$100,800 by the time you add the juice. But the stunner was yet to come. This '71 Duster 340, Curious Yellow with a four-speed, had the whole place mumbling as the gavel fell at \$159,500, in the house, so that means the actual selling price was \$175,450! Bear in mind, no Duster had ever sold for more than \$77,000, and everyone thought that was crazy. This year, three Dusters brought over \$100k each at Mecum, with this yellow machine being the first of its kind to bring north of

\$150,000, and it more than doubled the previous record high price for one of these cars. Do you want us to explain that to you? We can't, and honestly, nobody can. We can tell you what we suspect drove it that high, but why anyone would fork out so much money for a car the seller figured would bring around \$60,000 is genuinely inexplicable.

The key to big money at an auction like Mecum is presentation. All the big money Dusters were extremely nice cars and were all very well documented with papers and resto photos prominently displayed. The seller of the Curious Yellow Duster, however, had gone above and beyond the norm. All the receipts for the Mike Mancini restoration were with the car, photos galore taken during the restoration were well displayed, photos of the numerous date-coded NOS parts on the car were there, its MCACN Gold Certification and magazine appearances were displayed, and it didn't

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hurt that Auto World Diecast had made a 1/18th scale model of this particular car after seeing it at MCACN in 2017. The car was immaculately detailed top and bottom, and you couldn't have found a speck of dust on this Duster. The seller literally did everything right. But, at the end of the day, it's still a 340 Duster, right? The old saying of something being worth more than the sum of its parts was proven when this car sold. The money totaled up by the auction house for the car was in error, as Mike confirmed to us, and it was totaled up far higher than the restoration had cost. This one makes about as much sense as the RTS 'Cuda selling for \$2 million at Mecum Indy last year – a sum all of us who knew the car couldn't believe, and some four to five times what everyone expected it to sell for. Getting caught up in auction hype? Being a little too showy because the bidders are tipsy? A handful of people with more money than they know what to do with? We'd say the Mecum sale was a combination of all those

factors. Bidenomics doesn't come into play with the sky-high prices. Yes, we realize everything costs more now than it did four years ago. Bread is much more expensive, cold drinks are sky high, and forget about buying steaks or hamburger meat, which is up more than 50% since Biden took office. Those are directly tied to an economy that's been shot to pieces by Democratic regulations. Collector cars have, and always will be, bought with disposable income – the extra money people don't need to pay their house notes or buy necessities. So why did the prices explode, not only on the Dusters, but on all the Mopars at the sale, and virtually everything else they sold? The only valid theory we have doesn't bode well; perhaps those with huge bankrolls are bailing out of their paper money and buying physical assets before the money just isn't worth anything. The only other theory, richer older gents are realizing they're running out of time, they can't take the money with them, so they're blowing it on fun things while they can still enjoy them for a while. Honestly,

that's the only two theories we have that could possibly explain that sale or this record-breaking '71 Duster.

We'll assume you're a Mopar fanatic or you wouldn't be reading this, so let's delve into the car itself, and things might make even less sense. Mike Mancini's involvement with the Plymouth started back in 2016 when one of his customers, Steve Cabral, over in Massachusetts, bought the Duster off noted West Coast collector Scott Smith in Washington State – talk about going coast-to-coast! The car made its way east and Steve immediately hauled it to American Muscle Car Restorations in Rhode Island, where Mike got his first good look at the car. Steve has a small fleet of Mopars, but he's wanted a '71 340 four-speed Duster for quite a while, and he was seemingly cursed not being able to find one. That's why he jumped on this one, even though it was on the opposite end of the universe. The Duster is a fairly early build car, assembled at the Los Angeles assembly line in September of 1970, and having spent

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its whole life on the West Coast, there was no rust to speak of anywhere. For some unknown reason, somebody had replaced both quarter panels somewhere along the way and they weren't welded on correctly and didn't fit very well, so they knew immediately that would be the first big job at hand. Looking it over, and seeing how clean the car really was, both the guys decided rather quickly this should be one of their "masterpiece" quality restorations, which means pulling everything apart and finding as many NOS parts as possible, then building it back better than the factory would've ever dreamed of. So, the Duster was torn limb from limb at American Muscle Car, Steve began rounding up NOS parts from across the country, and lucky for the car, they photographed almost everything when it arrived at the shop. Headlights in the original boxes, exhaust manifolds with the proper date codes, you name it, even brake shoes in factory boxes with the correct dates on them. PK Machine Shop, in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, took in hand the 340 in the car, and Steve wanted it a bit wilder than stock. So, that's not a 340 you're looking at, it's got a stroker crank, so it's actually a small block 426" motor

with a slightly choppy cam and some nicely ported heads to go along with everything. Outwardly, it's stone stock looking, and Mike's crew detailed it to the nines with repro date-coded belts, hoses, plug wires, all the decals and markings you'd expect, along with the orange overspray on the otherwise bare metal painted exhaust manifolds. A fresh Legendary Interiors interior fills the cockpit, while Mike's other business, Instrument Specialties, restored the instrument panel, the dash, and the basic AM radio.

Finishing the car up just days before MCACN 2017, Mike showcased the mega-restoration at his display there, and as stated, the Plymouth scored 996 out of a possible 1,000 points – which may well make this the highest-scoring Duster in history. After that, it was back over to Steve Cabral, where it joined his other cars. There was just one problem; Steve likes to drive his cars, and this one was far too nice to drive! While he liked looking at the Duster, it rarely moved out of his garage, and primarily for that reason, Steve sold the Duster in the early part of 2023. Then the fun

began. According to Mike, the car traded hands at least twice, maybe three times, before the latest owner consigned the car to Mecum! So, this thing had two or three owners in less than a year before hitting the block in Kissimmee! And the rest, as they say, is history.

As for the car itself, somebody special ordered this one to go fast. It is not a heavily optioned car by any means. The 340 is hooked to a four-speed without a floor console, and she's got factory 3.91 Sure Grip gears out back. The plain steelies and Dog Dish hubcaps were presumably ordered because mags were going on ASAP. There's a single-painted driver's side sport mirror on the door, no power brakes, no power steering, and just a basic AM radio for tunes. And, of course, the color, Curious Yellow, which was a slight bump up in price and is seldom seen on '71 Dusters. Interestingly, they got the hood blackout treatment but didn't get the low-dollar addition of hood pins. Other than the color, this is a rather plain vanilla car. So, the options and the rarity didn't sell it, it was the quality of the restoration along with the immense amount of

paperwork and photos. Does this now mean every Duster out there is worth more? Unfortunately, there will be a momentary rise in prices, as there always seem to be when you have auction anomalies like this, but common sense will eventually return, and the Dusters and Darts will remain entry-level vehicles for the muscle car hobby. Half a dozen mega-rich people at one particular auction aren't going to direct the prices of Dusters, there are too many of these cars out there. It's a very interesting case of condition, presentation, and at least half a dozen very wealthy people suddenly getting caught up in Dusters at Mecum, perhaps for no other reason than everything else was going too high and they were bound and determined to put at least one more car in their collection. We don't see this becoming a pattern, it was just a wild week down in Florida, and as we've all seen before, people tend to get caught up in the auction frenzy and pay prices they'd never dream of paying in the real world or at a swap meet.

In the meantime, congrats to Mike Mancini and Steve Cabral for teaming up to create what's probably the finest restored Duster 340 out there. Quality don't come cheap, but even Mike was stunned when he saw this one gavel down. One thing we can predict; you're about to see more Dusters and Demons treated to over-the-top OEM restorations now in hopes of duplicating this feat. Only time will tell if that's a wise move or not. ✖

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