

ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

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CAMARO SS

WITH RETRO-NUEVO MUSTANG AND CHALLENGER
ALREADY ON THE ROADS, DOES CHEVY HIT THE NAIL ON THE HEAD?



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CAMARO FINDS A GOOD ROAD FROM YESTERDAY TO TOMORROW

By Joe Sage
Cover photo and
lead photo by
Christina Lawrie



UPSIDES

- It's like it's 1969 again! It's *NOT* like it's 1969 again!
- Awesome evolutionary front sheet metal styling
- Plenty of power in the SS. Good power and decent fuel mileage in the V6
- A real conversation piece: "Man! Chevy really nailed it with this one!"....

DOWNSIDES

- Less awesome rear sheet metal styling
- Munsters/boombox instrument panel
- A real conversation piece: "There's a reason Mustang people look at it the way they do"....

To paraphrase Paul Simon's *Kodachrome*: if you took all the cars I knew when I was single, and brought them all together for one night... well, the Camaro is back after seven years.

The comparisons among the new Camaro, Mustang and Challenger are inevitable, and all the national magazines have done full-blown performance comparos, with varying results. But the styling is often what gets discussed in casual company. We found the new Camaro to be mildly polarizing (see *Mobile Uploads-Part 2* sidebar, last page). But most people loved it. It's rare in these parts that a new car will bring so many people pulling up to inquire, or talking in the parking lot for 15 minutes, behavior more commonly seen when driving a rare classic. Then again, ours was one of the first on the road—and they're already becoming more common.

For many test vehicles we receive, we do our driving, compare the stats, compile our notes and move on. For some, we're just as happy to see the test period come to an end. For others, if the thing never left our garage and it became a daily driver, we'd be just fine with that. But for a few, we find ourselves actually knowing all the details when people ask, and we're aware that we'd actually consider going out and buying one. This is one of those. Our Camaro was gone in a Kodak moment (well, a week). But the memories linger.

The test period started off on the right foot: with fun, fun, fun. Thanks to a confluence of news feeds, social media sites and good timing on the vehicle cycle, we received our Camaro just in time for a free pizza from Papa John's (see sidebar). But it's not all about the pizza—it shows that John Schnatter is one more guy who, once he had a good muscle car in his blood, was charmed for life.

"The Camaro represents what I gave up to start Papa John's," said Schnatter. "Words cannot capture the emotions I am feeling in getting back that part of my history. I didn't have much back then, but for my business dreams to come true, I had to part with the one true asset I had to my name, and even then, there were no promises of success. I never gave up hope that someday I would get that car back."

Back to the Camaro of the twenty-first century. When you enter the car, no matter your own personal size, the first thing you'll notice is a very snug fit. Much of the beauty of the exterior comes from its relative high beltline and noticeably low roofline. Headroom aside, this affects the amount of glass area, and that is startlingly limited. Three-quarter rear visibility is reduced, of course, but perhaps more surprising is the windshield. It was



MOBILE UPLOADS - PART 1

Late one otherwise normal Wednesday morning, we noticed that Shad Balch, Environment and Energy Policy Specialist with General Motors in LA, had posted this on Facebook: "Heading to Papa John's in the Camaro for free pizza!" along with the phone-grab photo at top right.

And we were just getting hungry.

We had noticed the news item earlier in the day: John Schnatter, founder of Papa John's pizza, had been reunited with a 1971 Z28 Camaro he had sold in 1983 to keep his father's tavern afloat—a move that ultimately led to the mega-successful Papa John's chain. Schnatter always missed the car, so he launched a nationwide search. The car's owner, Jeff Robinson of Flatwoods KY, relinquished the keys for a \$250,000 reward (photo below). Schnatter was so happy to have his car back, he decreed that anyone showing up at Papa John's in a Camaro that day would get a free pizza. Lucky Shad!

We shot an email off to our brother-in-law, letting him know he could take his award-winning '67 down for a free pizza.

It was only after this that we realized, hey! We're getting our test Camaro SS at about one o'clock today, as a matter of fact. Lucky us! And sure enough, a beautiful red SS rolled into the lot in time for lunch. The fleet folks had already eaten, so we headed off to the nearest Papa John's solo, grabbing a similar windshield shot at the first red light and uploading it, too. (We received quite a few comments about photos of this car on Facebook—see following pages.)

But the serendipity didn't stop there. Emerging eagerly from one of the shops in the same strip as Papa John's was Somrit Tim (right), who told us he was awaiting delivery of his own brand new Camaro SS, still some weeks away, and had in fact only seen one, one time, sitting on the showroom floor. So we went for a spin. He shares the story of his anticipation—also on the following pages. ■



Photos: iPhone mobile uploads and snapshots by Joe Sage [4]; top mobile upload by Shad Balch.

Photo courtesy Papa John's.



The styling (except to those who just don't like anything about the car) nails it almost completely. We're delighted they maintained so much of the concept vehicle in production—a move Chrysler is good at, but not often GM. The hood bulge and rear haunches have "muscle" written all over them, and side sculpting is perfect. The only place we don't see things coming together is, well, the whole back.

actually upon entering the car for the second time that we noticed its front glass is really about the size of many vehicles' back glass, if that.

As anyone who's ever had too small an apartment or an MRI can attest, a little claustrophobia can sneak up on you or hit you like a bolt. The cabin of the new Camaro can have either effect. On the other hand, some people love a snug, confined space. One Valley police officer we were chatting with about the car thought that was the best part. In fact, he was the first of many inquiries we had with this car. Of course you go on high alert when an officer asks, "Is that your car?" But in this case, we were just sharing a parking lot, and he wanted to know how we liked it. Well, we said, we'd only driven it about 15 miles so far. (It didn't take long for the attention to start.) "Man," he continued, "if there is one car in the world I wish I could have right now, it'd be that one. They just nailed it! I love that car. Did you see the inside? It's like a race car!" We'd already noticed the snug feeling inside, so asked whether he had been inside yet, to experience the gun-slit windows. His response? "Oh yeah, I love that! I love the interior, they just nailed that!" Tempering his enthusiasm, however, he added, "I wouldn't have the red, though." Because it's ticket-me red? "No, no," he replied. Because... "Have you seen the white?"

We might have to keep an eye peeled for a new white Camaro SS around town. He sounded ready to sign on the line.

He would surely be thinking of the car purely for his own use, though—a few weeks later, we drove the SS again, briefly, along with the



The 2010 Camaro SS produces 426 horsepower and 420 lb-ft of torque from the LS3 V8, running on regular unleaded (though premium can be used for increased performance). The interior overall is comfortable and well-appointed, though a little claustrophobic to some, with clear instruments and controls. Unfortunately, we couldn't escape the idea that at least three different teams had divvied up duties on the gauges and audio.

6-cylinder RS (see caption and photo at the end of this story), in the company of a colleague who was evaluating the Camaro for police use. Thinking specifically about personnel and gear, including such details as the on-board computer, he found it was probably all too tight.

The V8 in the Camaro SS creates engine and exhaust sounds that are a joy for any motorhead to experience. We found these weren't the only noises, however; we had quite a bit of wind noise behind our ear with the driver's window down, which didn't seem to come from the seatbelt, as it often does, but rather just a wind-tunnel oversight—a non-issue most of the year, in our air-conditioned climate. The engine note is sweet, indeed, but we sometimes noticed it had more bark than bite—we'd hear a satisfying growl that was not backed up by commensurate torque, and our satisfaction would dim.

Handling was very good, with minimal (or no) rear-suspension hop, when pushed. We did have an issue several times when we felt as though the car was trying hard to leave its lane of travel. Steering and suspension seemed fine otherwise, so perhaps the test car has been pushed hard (ya think?) and the tires were wearing unevenly.

The rear side window is so tiny, as you'd expect, that when you look back for a lane-changing 3/4 view, you wonder why it's even there. It made us think of the window you might find in an airliner's john, if they had windows at all. But it works from the outside, and you know you have to be proficient (and prudent) with mirrors in a coupe, regardless.

We have nothing against a manual parking brake, but this one has such a long arc, you almost run out of room for your arm while deploying it. This would be a great candidate for push-

button electronics.

The backup lights are in the design category of: if you can't find a clever way to integrate them, then make no bones about it, just stick them on there, let them do their thing, form following function and arguably one way to do things. But the whole rear styling needs a little more work, from sheetmetal to lamps. It's the weakest angle.

So a few minor points, as with any test vehicle, especially over just one short week. Bottom line? They don't much matter. You find yourself settling into the car, ignoring (or familiarizing yourself with) the little things, and thinking: can you really drive around in a car this cool, all day every day? Part comic book and part performance champ, you look forward to getting back in and heading out.

We headed out repeatedly, giving it the usual runs on freeways and surface streets, but also driving it well out into the northeast Valley, and also up the Beeline Highway. Confident, poised and powerful. Comfortable. The controls and instruments all easy to operate.

But speaking of instruments, we're not alone in wondering why the exterior styling team didn't see things through on the instrument panel. The primary gauges are housed in cowls that are evocative of the late '60s Camaros, a nice touch in a way, but they have a shape and dominance that doesn't match the overall style, sort of a Herman Munster look. The audio and HVAC unit has yet another look, universally reminding people of a cheap boombox. Four gauges at the head of the console appealed to us the most in terms of style (though a little small to get an "A" for readability). We've found others who liked those the least. But the main thing is: the three groups have



A TALE OF ANTICIPATION

By Somrit Tim - early October 2009

The new Camaro first caught my attention when I saw the "Bumblebee" in the movie *Transformers*. From that moment on, I couldn't resist. I wanted that car!

On a Sunday in mid-August I called around to see what dealerships were open. They all were. I ended up going to one some distance from home. I talked to their internet sales rep for about an hour and said I had driven 40 minutes from home



and wasn't there to waste his time—I was serious about getting this vehicle. What I *really* wanted was MSRP or sticker price instead of price at the time of \$5-8 thousand over sticker. After about an hour of negotiations, my uncle joined the conversation and emphasized that we were seriously interested, so let's get this deal done. The rep said, "well, I have to talk to my manager and I will get to you tomorrow morning." Sure enough, he called at 9am and said he could do the deal. He faxed over confirmation of the deal and wrote on the cover page "expect delivery 6-8 weeks."

Papa John's held an event one day for Camaro owners. If you own a Camaro, drive it by and pick up your free pizza. Well, that's when I saw the car. I was talking to the hair stylists in the salon next to Papa John's when out of nowhere I saw a beautiful Victory Red 2SS Camaro parked out front. The driver got out of the car and was taking pictures with his iPhone. I introduced myself and told a brief story about my placing an order for the Camaro. He said he was with *Arizona Driver Magazine* and had just received this as a test car an hour ago. I mentioned that "I have never driven or even ridden in the car, never heard a purr from the engine," and so it remained until that day at Papa John's. We went for a ride for a couple of miles, and it was just an amazing vehicle that Chevrolet has put together. From that moment on, I just could not get the thoughts out of my head about the day I would finally pick her up.

I am currently still waiting for the car, about a week and a half until pick-up which is about mid-October. The wait at first was not bad. About 3-4 weeks waiting was fine. From that point on, I have been getting really impatient because the big day is coming and I don't think I've ever been this excited about something in a long time. I work in a career that requires a lot of patience, but this anticipation/waiting is really getting to me.

[Editor's note: he was due to take delivery the same day this issue went to press.] ■

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completely divergent styles. This is visually jarring, but also surely doesn't help a driver's scanning of the full array. We'd love to see the whole dash redesigned.

We also were disappointed with the air conditioning. Though we were setting heat records at the time, this cabin is so small, we would have expected efficient cooling. But it was often very hot in there, even when all maxed out (and loud).

Be that as it may, the car was received well by its road companions. Everybody wanted to let us into traffic. It's a feel-good car: people see this thing and it doesn't matter if they're rich or poor, they like to give you a wave and send you on your way. Whenever we parked, people would come out of their shops, or pull off another road, just to ask about it. The car is a genuine phenomenon. Given that GM already announced having outsold Mustang the month before we received the car, you'd think it wouldn't be such a rarity. The new Camaro is a real crowd-pleaser. We'd see people gaze after it, and we'd find ourselves looking for the reflection in windows, too. And of course this is a must-look-back car when you walk away.

Is this the car for the times? Does that matter? When driving a gas hogging performance vehicle, it's easy to look around at most everything else and think of something economical that might be wiser to have instead. But when you're driving the new Camaro, you just smile and think: nah, I wouldn't be trading this for that.

The Camaro is not all things to all people, but it is a very solid iteration of what it is. All things said, we'd be perfectly happy if this one had never left our fleet. ■

Camaro RS: 3.6L V6 vs 6.3L V8

It doesn't take long to get spoiled. 304 horsepower should be a perfectly respectable amount, and that's what the 6-cylinder Camaro RS delivers. Just do yourself a favor and don't drive it immediately after the 426-hp Camaro SS V8. It does offer better fuel mileage, 18/29 city/highway versus 16/25 (with automatic—a hair lower with manual). And the RS starts just under \$23,000, while our SS test car stickered at almost \$36,000. We did a refresher drive in the SS a few weeks after our full test week, then took the six out. Comparing the power in that order was surely unfair. But we were also very aware of the difference in suspension, plus narrower tires and wheels. Cornering and grip were far better in the SS, with wheels well planted.

We had about a half-hour drive of each, in north Phoenix. After two of us had driven the SS again, we headed out with the six. And our co-driver's first comment says it all: "Is that floored? Wow. And the same 300+ horse engine as the Cadillac CTS? It's a dog, dude. For a 6-cylinder, I'd take the Mustang." Before you make a decision between a V6 or V8 Camaro, try them both. Or just the RS. Anyone who doesn't drive them both will likely be quite happy with the six, especially for the price.

MOBILE UPLOADS - PART 2

They say that art is art, as long as it gets a reaction or stirs emotions. We posted some early pix on Facebook and did get reactions. Was it polarizing? We wouldn't quite call it that. These are the kind of opinions people just have fun dishing out.

ARIZONA DRIVER: What are the odds... here we are reading about the Papa John's Camaro and free pizzas... Shad is headed out for his... I'm reminding my brother-in-law to go for one... when I remembered we had a 6-speed manual Camaro SS test car arriving today. Off to the pizza shop!

Joe in Denver: Sick ... in a good way...

John, architect, Nashville: I think this new Camaro design has bloated with age! Call me old fashioned, I guess.

Bev in AZ: Very cool car.

Larry in Delaware: The one criticism of the car from me regards the "face." Considering how closely the designers heaved to the 1969 version's themes, they blew it up-front by not incorporating those beautiful "big eyes" that the deeply inset headlamps evoked on the 1969 models. That itself was an homage to the Giugiaro-designed Alfa Romeo Giulia coupes of the 1960s, of which both were so pretty. The new Camaro has beady little "eyes" that make the front seem "blah" to me.

DC in Alabama: Some guys have all the luck!

RS in Denver: Drove new Camaro, my take away: needs a muffler boost, too quiet: not the same sound as original Z-28; restrictive interior viewing, too many blind spots. No retro similarities tie in to original '68. Shame on Lutz for letting this get off the drafting table.

WAH in NJ: Nice looking car (but I'm not liking the "Cars" grille). Saw one at cruise last night; said SS but may have been fake. License plate was: GIFT2ME. Just came back from the Wheels of Time rod and custom show in PA and saw the new Mustang, Challenger, and Camaro all together on display. For style, I like the Challenger best and that comes from a GM guy. The Camaro is more of a continuation (of an old theme); the Challenger more of a retro. The now defunct T-bird was a continuation too. The VW works. Two totally different approaches that can be pleasing, depending on your perspective. I can go either way, but I just like the overall looks of the Challenger better and it has nothing to do with the retro vs. a continuation theme. The Camaro grille is too distracting to the overall appearance of the car. Don't like it.

AZD: This car does get attention. Anyone driving a Mustang sure checks it out.

Lynn in AZ: Ummm....do you know why we look at the Camaro the way we do?

AZD: Ha... you're so easy to yank. ■



Camaro SS with V8, left, Camaro RS with V6, right

Photos: iPhone mobile uploads and snapshots by Joe Sage [3].