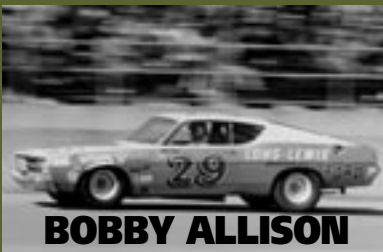




'78 TORONADO



'59 MERC WAGON



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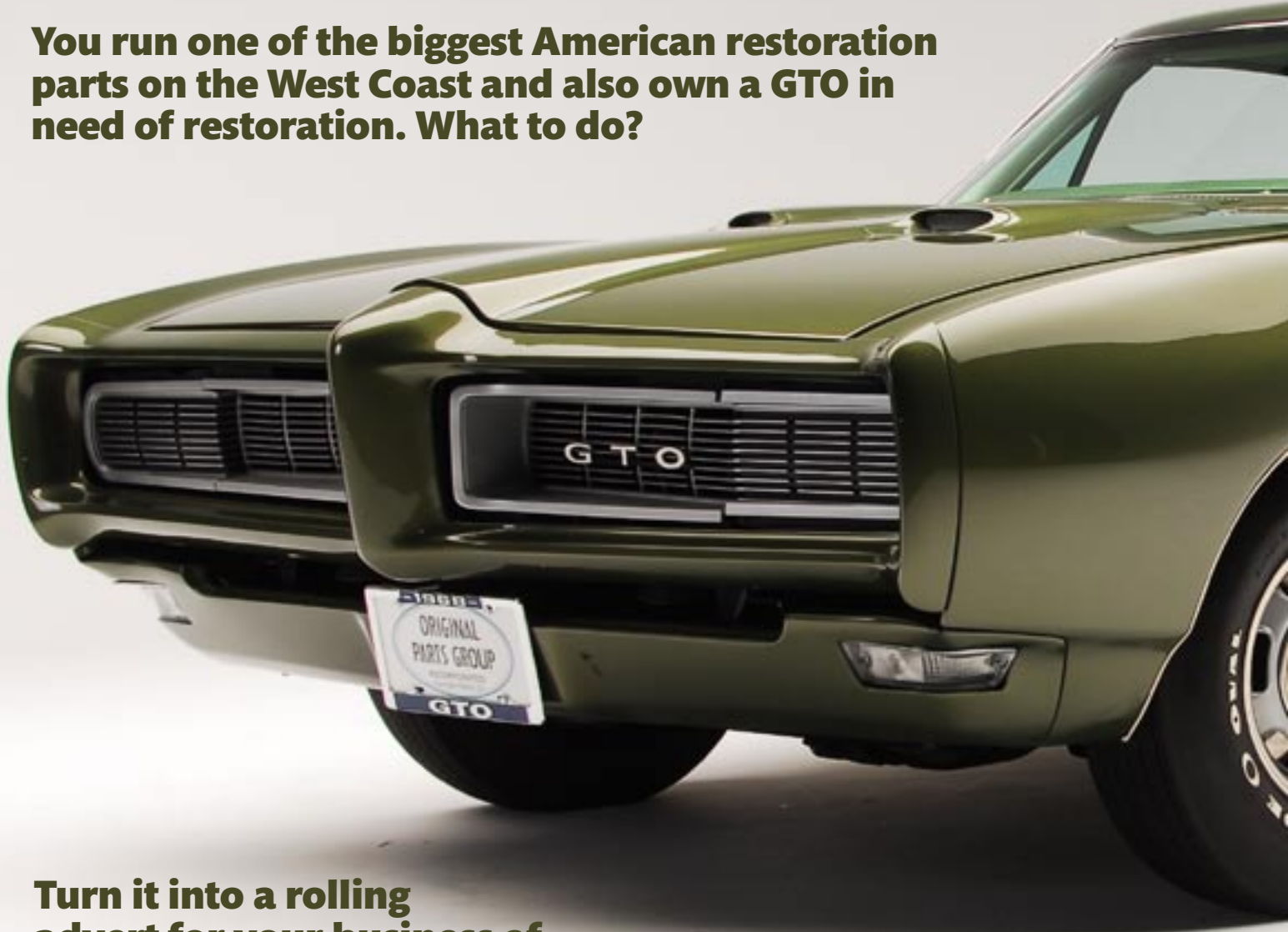
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Tiger, Tiger, Bu

You run one of the biggest American restoration parts on the West Coast and also own a GTO in need of restoration. What to do?



Turn it into a rolling advert for your business of course! Behold Original Parts Group's eye-wateringly perfect 1968 GTO...

THE 1968 PONTIAC GTO, THEN IN ITS fifth year of production, first as an option package for the Tempest/LeMans series, then as a model in its own right from 1966 on, will be remembered fondly for many reasons. As the first of the breed (by the classic definition of a big engine of 350 cubic inches or more stuffed between the fender wells of an intermediate-sized car), it had set the standard for the class with all other muscle cars following behind it, typically watching its tail lights.

In 1968 the all-new GTO was voted *Motor Trend's* Car of the Year, due in part to its superlative styling – in the eyes of many the best of that year's GM restyled A-body intermediates – as well as for its then revolutionary, body-colored Endura rubber-covered front bumper, to the vast number of options, including

the mid-year, 366-horsepower Ram Air II that replaced the previously optional 360-horsepower Ram Air V8, that allowed one to personalize a GTO from mild-to-wild. With total sales of 87,684 units split between 77,704 2-door hardtops (no pillared coupes were offered in 1968 to compete with low-buck competitors like Plymouth's Road Runner) and 9,980, the 1968 GTO remained at the top of the muscle car sales chart for 1968. (FYI, the rarest 1968 Pontiac GTO model was the 366-horsepower convertible teamed up with a 3-speed automatic transmission; 22 units were produced versus 92 with the 4-speed manual transmission.)

The years have treated the GTO well, very well indeed, the 1968 model in particular. With the possible exception of the first year 1964

model immortalized on the cover of *Car and Driver* magazine with its namesake Ferrari 250 GTO, it is in the eyes of the GTO cognoscenti, the definitive GTO, a perfect balance of styling, power, and dare we say handling, even when describing a stock sixties muscle car. The 1968 GTO had it all, in spades.

As mentioned in that seminal *Motor Trend* article, the Pontiac Division was led at the time by its maverick, 42-year-old General Manager John DeLorean, the father of the GTO. Also part of the Pontiac leadership team was its chief stylist, 40-year-old Jack Humbert, and plastics expert Josh Madden – responsible for the Endura bumper – was even younger. Pontiac was GM's excitement division, a far cry to how it has evolved to today, possibly following Oldsmobile on its way to extinction

Shining Bright...



as GM tries to right-size itself for the new automotive reality.

Performance is where the GTO had established its mark and with the top dog, 366-horsepower Ram Air III V8, the white-jacketed MotorTrend testers coaxed its COTY examples from 0-60 in 6.5 seconds (4-speed) and 7.3 seconds (automatic) and covered 1,320 feet in 14.45 seconds (4-speed) and 15.93 seconds (automatic). To put things in their proper perspective, a box stock 2008 Chevrolet Malibu LTZ with the 6-speed automatic, equipped with the 3.6-liter DOHC V6 putting out 251-horsepower will run from 0-60 in 6.4 seconds and cover the quarter mile in just 15 seconds flat with a trap speed of 93.8 miles-per-hour...with the air conditioning on while delivering an EPA-rated 17-cubic-inch/26 highway miles-per-gallon. The iconic GTO? It would be lucky to average 13 miles-per-gallon on the highway.

Putting aside the then-and-now comparisons, let's take a look at the incomparable example featured here. For starters, it's the proud possession of Dave Leonard who just happens to be the CEO of the Original Parts Group based in Huntington Beach, California, the premier supplier of classic GMA-body restoration parts from the sixties and seventies. It shouldn't surprise you that in picking the 1968 GTO to showcase his company's products, that there was an A-body Pontiac lurking in Dave's past. 'My first car was a 1971 Pontiac Le Mans 350,' says Dave. 'That car generated a lot of enthusiasm for me to get into restoration, especially for the GMA-bodies. I own over 30 GM muscle cars as well as some old Cadillacs. My current resto project is a 1966 Buick GS 400.'

When we prompted Dave for details on this particular GTO, there wasn't too much that he could share. 'It was bought off of eBay from a seller in upstate New York,' remembers Dave. 'The car was complete and we verified that the drivetrain was numbers-matching but it did not run. To say that the car needed a complete restoration would be an understatement. The GTO needed a complete restoration, it was original but in very bad shape, every part needed replacing, motor needed rebuilding.'

'The frame-off restoration was performed by JH Restoration in Riverside, California. All



parts were supplied by OPGI,' smiles Dave. 'The complete restoration took about 12 months and we have before and after photos.' When it came to the drivetrain, no expense was spared by Leonard as he turned to the Pontiac specialists at Butler Performance in Tennessee.

'The car was restored back to original specifications,' says Dave. We were helped by the fact that we had a copy of the build sheet that we were able to get from Pontiac to make sure we had all the correct parts and options. The engine is mated to a 200-4R overdrive transmission built by California Performance Transmission in Huntington Beach, California.'

The color combination of the green exterior matched to the contrasting Ivy Gold interior makes an outstanding combination; it's almost as if you can imagine it hanging a U-turn on Detroit's Woodward Avenue, as pictured in the iconic ad from the sixties and duplicated countless times over the years by GTO enthusiasts. Dave was proud to note that the car won Best Restored GM vehicle at the 2008 SEMA show, an award sponsored by GM. When queried about the car's best attribute

Dave was quick to comment that in an era of retro-mods with crate motors, riding on oversize rolling stock, this GTO is the real deal.

Over the years I've seen many GTO station wagon phantoms, examples of cars that manufacturers didn't have the foresight or courage to build. As I looked through the viewfinder at Dave Leonard's impeccable GTO hardtop, my thoughts went to the ultra clean LeMans Safari wagon I saw on eBay a few months back. I tried to imagine it with an Endura front bumper, hidden headlights, and a bucket seat interior outfitted with all-new OPGI trim.

I think that the next time I see a clean LeMans station wagon, I'll imagine it in full GTO trim, and realize that with the help of OPGI, turning fantasy to reality will be, literally, a phone call away. In the meantime enjoy the photos of this reference restoration, realizing that this GTO is better than the day it rolled off the assembly line. ★





1968 PRODUCTION



For an online collection of GM A-body television commercials, visit <http://automotivetraveler.com/jump/27>



ORIGINAL PARTS GROUP

NOW located in a brand new state-of-the-art 100,000 square-foot facility in Seal Beach, not far from its Santa Ana beginnings, Original Parts Group is ready to serve GM A-body enthusiasts worldwide. 'You could almost build a brand new 1965 Chevelle from our catalog,' says CEO Dave Leonard. Original Parts Group Inc., better known to Bowtie enthusiasts around the world as OPGI, is a one-stop shop for classic GM A-Body (Chevrolet Chevelle, Monte Carlo and El Camino, Pontiac GTO, Tempest and LeMans, Oldsmobile F-85, Cutlass, and 4-4-2, and Buick Special, Skylark, GS, and GSX) intermediates as well as 1963 to 1975 Buick Riviera, and 1962 to 1977 Pontiac Grand Prix models.

Leonard, inspired by his brother Jeff, who started Classic Industries, another company focused on GM

restoration parts, Leonard started out in the early eighties with his first company, Chevelle Classics, which started out as a used parts business. By reinvesting his profits, it didn't take Leonard too long to start manufacturing his own reproduction parts, starting moldings and trim, before the others who have followed him. 'The soft trim, the kind of parts that go bad on classic cars just from wear and tear, is what I focused on. This included moldings as well as stainless steel trim,' says Leonard. 'Next were parts that required chrome plating. After that I purchased obsolete parts from GM, stockpiling them as they were discontinued.'

Besides the '68 GTO pictured here, Leonard's collection includes another A-body, a '71 Olds Cutlass Supreme - his daily driver - that is often found in his parking spot at OPGI. In the coming months OPGI will expand, covering Cadillacs from its golden age in the fifties all the way up to the mid-seventies when the first OPEC oil embargoes changed the marque forever.

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Total: 87,684

