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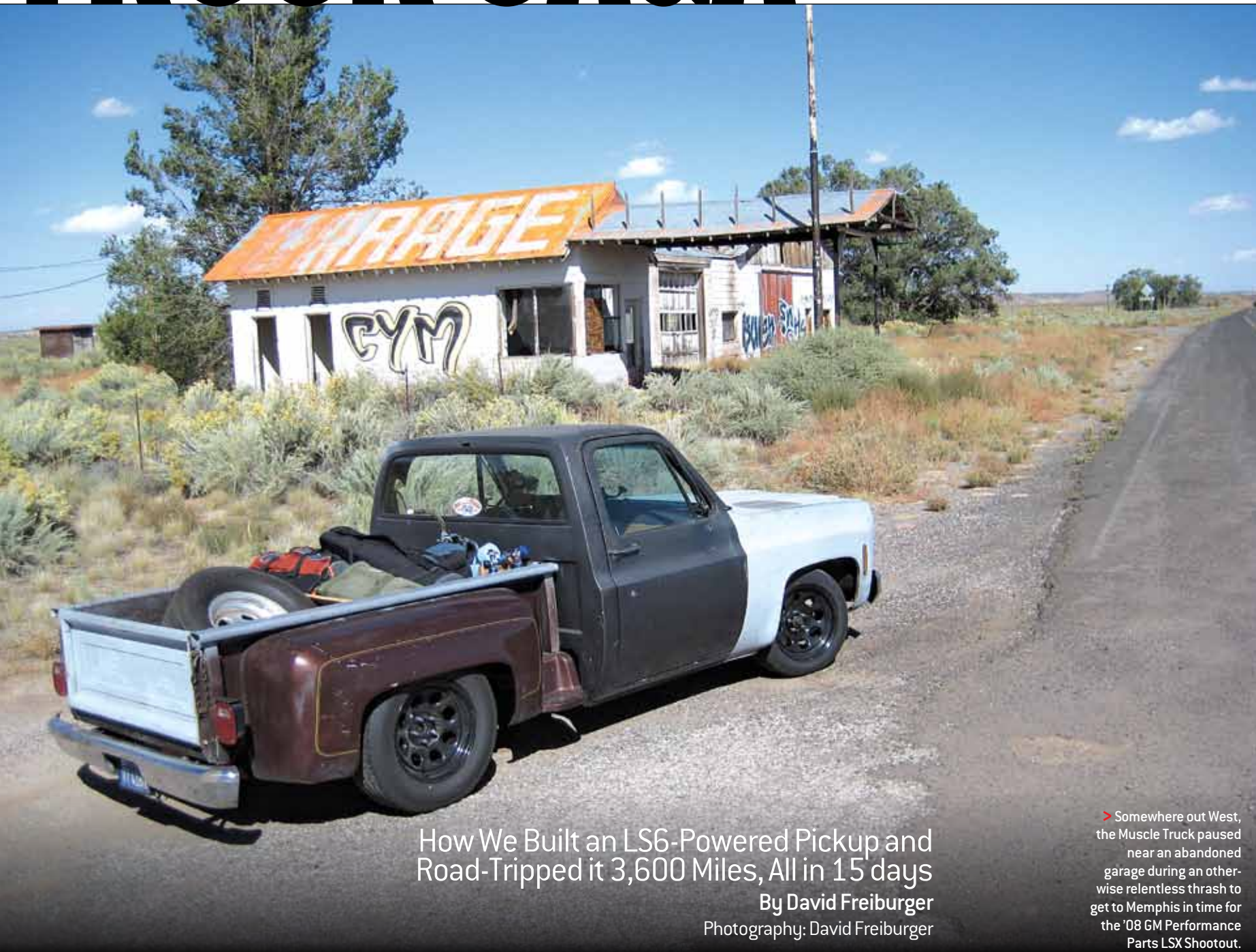
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**HOT ROD WHERE IT ALL BEGAN**

# THE MUSCLE TRUCK SAGA

> Here's the '74 C10 we started with, old-school stance and all. The condition of the underpinnings and the sheetmetal is far better than the beater vibe suggests.



How We Built an LS6-Powered Pickup and Road-Tripped it 3,600 Miles, All in 15 days

By David Freiburger

Photography: David Freiburger

> Somewhere out West, the Muscle Truck paused near an abandoned garage during an otherwise relentless thrash to get to Memphis in time for the '08 GM Performance Parts LSX Shootout.



> Our first step was to tug the truck's original 350/350 combo and throw it into our '72 Carryall parts chaser. Note our uncanny ability to puke ATF all over the floor despite the use of a tailshaft plug. We've got skills.

We have a library of automotive schemes logged in the backs of our minds, and in the face of deadlines, the hunt for perfection, and the pursuit of other dreams, they rarely come to fruition—until one day a plan drops from the sky and makes it all happen on a ramrod deadline.

That, in synopsis, is the story of the Muscle Truck. For years we've noticed that, in a world of overpriced muscle cars, V-8-powered pickups still clog the classified ads at dirt-cheap prices. We've often looked at them and wondered why no one

spins them as street machines. There's an entire market for quaint, classic trucks and another for 22-inch-wheel-wearing customs sprinkled with the polished poop from a CNC mill. But where are the drag trucks? The handling trucks? The top-speed pickups? The *real* performance stuff? They are out there but overlooked and underpublicized.

More importantly, what if you could build one truck to participate in all sorts of different performance-oriented escapades? A jack of all races. That

was our scheme, and about two years ago, we bought a '74 Chevy C10 shorted Stepside with starry-eyed visions of wheelspin grandeur. It looked like a beater even though the prior owner had completed a body-off resto on the chassis. It ran and drove with a fairly fresh Pep Boys 350 under the hood and cost just \$1,500 to own.

Then, predictably, it sat ignored. Almost as predictably, in late September 2008 we realized we absolutely had to race at the GM Performance Parts LSX Shootout drag races at the



> We used a conversion kit from Muscle Rods to mate the Gen III LS6 engine to the truck. The stock setup uses clamshell-style engine mounts that get thrown away. The stock frame mounts are then redrilled, using the provided template, to install the BRP spool-type mount. The kit was fantastic, but knowing what we know now, we would have scooted the engine rearward an extra inch.



> Here's our lengthy drivetrain, including the GM Performance Parts LS6 crate engine [PN 17801268] that can be had for \$5,300 via mail order. We mated it to a Dynamic Racing Transmissions TH400 that has an SFI-approved UltraBell bellhousing from JW Performance. The Gear Vendors Under/Overdrive offers an extra gear of 0.78:1 that can be activated in any transmission gear, turning the three-speed into a six-speed.



> Here's the second half of the Muscle Rods mount as seen bolted to the engine. Also note our MSD starter and Milodon oil pan. A stock F-car oil pan would have fit in the truck, but we already had the Milodon kit installed on the engine.



> The distance from the bellhousing surface to the crank flange is different on a Gen III engine than it is on an old Chevy V-8, so this spacer and bolt package is required to hook the conventional trans to the newer engine. These are all GM parts: PN 2551367 for the flexplate, 12563532 for the spacer, and 12563533 [you'll need a quantity of six] for the bolts.

NMCA World Finals in Memphis. It was to be held October 15-18 just for vehicles powered by GM Gen III and Gen IV engines. We had an LS6 crate engine in one corner and our Stepside in another. Foregone conclusions are us. We had just 15 days to build the truck and cannonball it from Hollywood to Memphis in time to be heroes.

The captions tell the story of how we started with a bone-stock truck and treated it to a drivetrain that included a GM Performance Parts LS6, a Dynamic Racing Transmissions TH400, a Gear Vendors Under/Overdrive, and a Ford 9-inch differential from an F-100 parts truck that was sitting around (and that was subsequently conveniently impounded by the fuzz). We had to completely rewire the thing using a Painless Wiring harness, and the stock fuel system was likewise heaved over the wall after a new Aero-motive setup was installed. Since the original suspension was too

skyscraping, we added Air Ride up front and a homegrown dropped-leaf setup with Cal-Tracs bars and a step-notched frame out back. The interior also got an overhaul using junkyard parts.

In case you hadn't noticed, that's a lot of work to get done in about two weeks. We worked late nights with the shop illuminated by the warm glow emanating from our credit card. The Summitracing.com bookmark on our computer got worn to a nub.

Early in the morning of Thursday, October 16, the truck enjoyed a minor celebration of its new life with a test trip around the block. All systems go. But that was in Los Angeles. Memphis was 1,800 miles away, qualifying was on Friday, and the meatsacks in charge of the operation hadn't slept in 24-plus hours—and even at that, the shut-eye during the prior two weeks had only been brief snoozes on the shop floor.

Trading off napping in the cab, we only got roused by The Man three times over the next 32 hours as we cannonballed directly to Memphis.

We arrived slack-jawed but just in time for the NMCA's Charlie Harmon to spot us in line, fast-track us to tech inspection, and wave us into the staging lanes to be the very last vehicle to qualify for the LSX Truck index classes. We had no time to bolt on our slicks, swap our 3.00 gears for the 5.13s we had with us, or set up the nitrous system. We'd planned for 12.0s but had to guess what it would run in dog-eared street trim. We shot for the 14.0 index, then ran 14.03 on our single qualifying pass. We looked like geniuses right up to the point where we fell asleep at the wheel in front of the timeslip shack.

We were thrilled that we actually made it to the LSX Shootout with a truck we'd built in two weeks and that we'd nailed our last-second choice of index. It stung that we were 2 seconds slower than planned, but steak, beer, and coma dulled the pain. The suffering would be revisited the next morning when we broke out in the first round with a 13.80. We entered the brackets and eventually ran 13.57 at 102.42 mph, though we were sandbagging during a bracket race, so we have no full-throttle data other than a best eighth-mile time of 8.69 at 82.23 mph. Regardless, low 13s on street meats with the highway gears isn't bad for a pickup. Plus, we know it can only get better. Come back next month to see if we're right.

**"You guys are completely insane."  
—Dr. Jamie Meyer, GM Performance Parts**



> With the new drivetrain installed in the truck, it was an easy deal to slide the stock trans crossmember rearward on the frame to line up with the mount on the Gear Vendors, then drill new holes to secure the crossmember. The extra length of the GV requires a new driveshaft, but we needed one for our custom engine location, lowered suspension, and Ford 9-inch rearend, anyway.



> With a very loose converter, tall tires, and 3.00:1 rearend gears, we knew trans cooling would be extra critical. We installed one of B&M's SuperCoolers right up front. We like these because the fins do not easily bend.



> The Milodon rear-sump pan uses a billet plate to align with the oil feed holes in the block and feed oil to a remote filter. The pan also comes with the hoses and spin-on filter adapter. We located the filter on the backside of the front left fenderwell.



> Since the LS6 does not accept a mechanical fan, we used Flex-a-lite's PN 210 unit with dual 12-inch fans. The 26 1/4 x 15 1/2-inch fan combo fit perfectly on the stock radiator, which we had recored.



> Here's the LS6 ready to run. The Muscle Rods/Hedman midlength headers could not possibly have been easier to install. We ran the engine with a Holley 750 carb, an Edelbrock RPM intake (PN 71187), an MSD stand-alone programmable controller (PN 6010), and stock coils. The GM Performance Parts front-engine accessory drive kit (PN 19155067) is expensive but super, super clean and easy to install and comes complete with the alternator, power steering pump, and A/C compressor (which we did not use).



> We installed a 31-spline Ford 9-inch rearend that we harvested from a '78 F-100 parts truck. To get the truck as low as we eventually want it, we had to tear out the bed floor and weld in step notches using a handy kit from Suicidedoors.com. The previous photo shows how we added an upper crossmember for our Rancho RS9000 shocks from Calvert Racing.



> Our friends at Aeromotive knew we'd eventually step up the power in ludicrous ways and prepared us for that eventuality with an A1000 pump and regulator. The cell is a Summit Racing 16-gallon unit, PN 290111, measuring 26x18x9½ inches. It fit perfectly aft of the axle, and we welded in an extra crossmember to secure it in place. All the AN line is from Earl's.



> The rearend is hung with stock leaf springs, though we removed all but two leaves per side. We also flipped the axle on top of the leaf springs to lower the ride height. Traction assistance comes from a set of CalTracs bars; Calvert Racing sells a version of the kit specifically for trucks



> The powertrain swap was finally a wrap when we found a bunch of leftover 3-inch tubing and built our own exhaust system with some short little DynoMax Bullet mufflers. It's way loud.



> Look how amazingly clean the floors are in the truck. We drilled through the virgin sheetmetal to mount our homemade shifter stand, drink holder, and BlackBerry retainer with its Hurst Quarter Stick shifter. Check the swanky Saddleman seat cover on the junkyard bench seat.

> We used redrilled axles and wheel adapters to fit Ford/Mopar-pattern wheels because we already had them. The wheels are Cragar Soft 8 steels in 17x9 with 5-inch backsacing. Tires are Toyo Proxes ST in 225/60R17 and 275/60R17. We were super happy with the truck's ride and handling on our trip, though stance-wise we need the tail down an inch or two. The converter is way, way too loose, but we got 17 mpg anyway using the Gear Vendors. **HRM**



> The revamped truck is heavy on electrical accessories, including the Air Ride RidePro compressor, electric fans, electric fuel pump, nitrous controller, and pending roll control. Chad Reynolds custom-wired it all using a combination of a 12-circuit fuse panel kit and a race car switch panel from Painless Wiring.



> At last, Memphis. We rejetted the carb a few times during the road trip, *Two Lane Blacktop*-style, but the only real problem we had en route was that we'd neglected to add an engine-to-frame ground strap. The shifter cable decided to handle that for us and melted all the plastic off the housing in the process.



> We needed the front end to be significantly lower than stock and accomplished that with an Air Ride Technologies kit using StrongArm tubular control arms, double-convolute airsprings, and 2-inch drop spindles. This was an incredibly easy installation, requiring drilling only for the installation of the new upper shock mount.

## SOURCES

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