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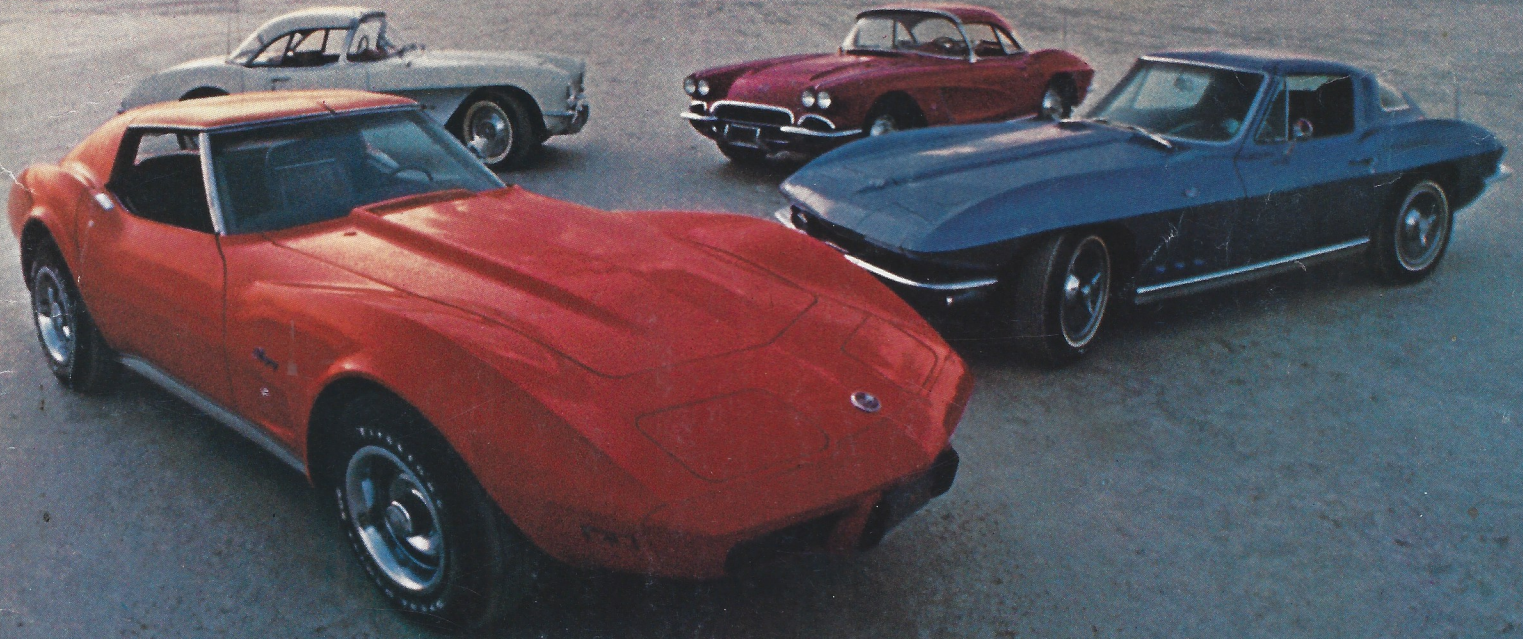
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# Performance Returns

Driving Impressions: 1976 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am 455

by Gary Witzenburg

**T**ake it however you want. A middle-finger gesture to Ralph Nader and the "safety" fanatics, flagrant disregard for what the Washington bureaucrats are telling us our cars should be, or just a maneuver to put some excitement back in the showrooms and shake some cobwebs off the sales desks.

Whatever the interpretation, our friends at Pontiac are up to their old tricks again. We all know how they started the whole thing back in '64 with the original GTO, then progressed from straight-line performance into real "drivers' cars" with the Firebird, Grand Prix and Grand Am.

A year ago, the 455 Firebird Trans Am was considered the last of a dead species, the real American Supercar—a

flared, scooped, spoilered and hood-shakered remnant of sweeter times. A last-standing Custer encircled by NHTSA, EPA, oil cartel and insurance company Indians.

Yet when the press was shown the '75 Pontiacs at the GM Proving Ground last year, there was a sparkling, brand new Trans Am—an emasculated 400 CID automatic, to be sure, with an economy rear axle ratio—but it still had the race-developed aerodynamics and the Woodward Avenue-inspired "shaker" hood-hickey and looked just as mean and nasty and businesslike as ever. But the mighty 455, we were told, had become another energy crisis casualty.

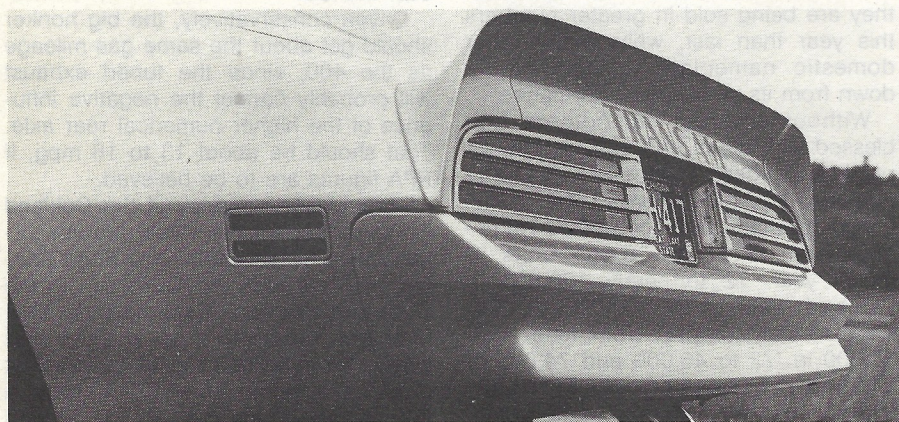
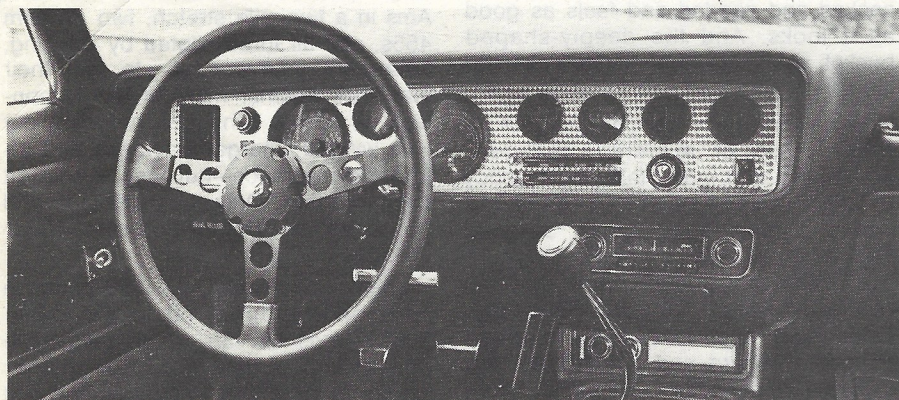
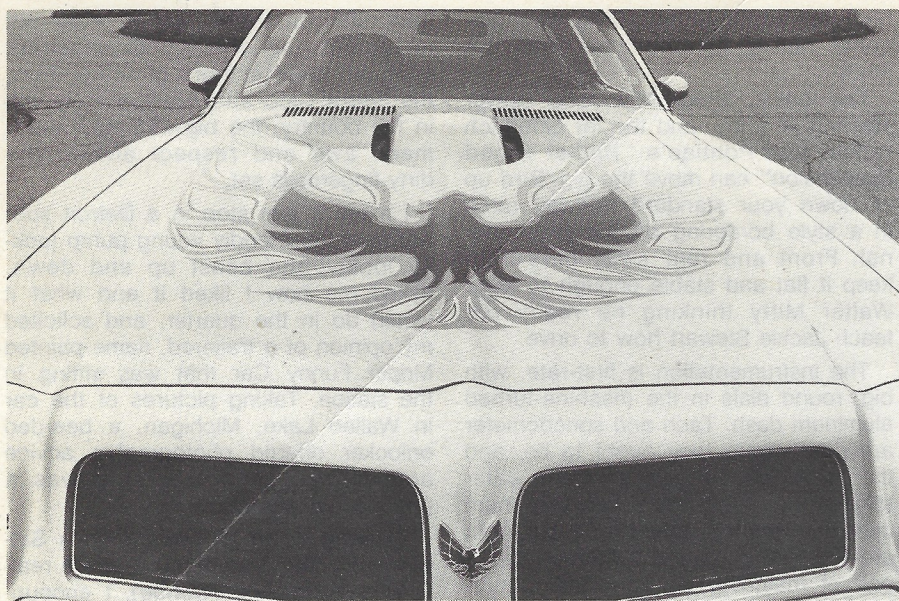
So imagine my surprise last summer when Dick Thompson and Bill Ott of Pontiac public relations casually men-

tioned that the division had decided to resurrect the 455 Trans Am and asked if I would care to drive one. It was a lovely silver machine like the '76 pictured here, and it was the most enjoyable Detroit iron I've had my sweaty hands on in a long, long time.

The 455 Trans Am Firebird comes in only one configuration. It's intended to "relate directly to people with a strong preference in this unique design of automobile," which is Pontiac's official way of saying that it's pure sex in the eye of the right beholder.

The big engine is borrowed directly from the big Pontiac, complete with 4-bbl. carburetor and lead-free 7.6:1 compression ratio. But it gets a specially tuned exhaust system terminating in twin chromed pipes under each rear flank, calculated to make aging GTO





mercifully at the magazine writers' preview a month before, and apparently the front disc pads had not been changed since then. As soon as they got hot, the brakes just sort of faded away to where even a lot of effort produced very little stopping power. This is disconcerting on a course such as Waterford but would not occur on the road, unless repeated hard stops were made without sufficient cooling time in between.

Unfortunately, we were beset by thunderstorms just as we got the watches out to time some laps, so we never did find out what the '76 Trans Am would do on a dry track. We did run it for a while in the rain and discovered a couple of other complaints. For one thing, there seemed to be a dead spot in the engine response—after nursing it through a slippery corner at part throttle, the power would lag momentarily when the throttle was opened again and then come on all at once.

Secondly, the forward weight bias from the heavy 455 engine combined with the mediocre GM tires made it nearly impossible to get the front end around the tighter turns; it would merely skid in a straight line until the car slowed enough to get some traction—before we could get the power back on and the back end out. After that, it would drift around just fine in a tailout attitude until the rpm reached that dead spot. All this made the 'Bird difficult to drive smoothly and quickly on a wet track, although the brakes got plenty of water cooling and stopped the car better than when the track had been dry.

All this has little bearing on the 455 Trans Am's street performance, since you can't drive it like that on public roads anyway; and no one is likely to road race the car without modifying it for that purpose. But it was a worthwhile test, since the Trans Am is about as close as you can get to a road racing car from an American showroom, and we wanted to see how close it really was.

We also did not get a chance to check top speed and acceleration times, but recent reports have credited the new 455 Trans Am with just under 120 mph top end and about 8.5 seconds 0-60. Quarter mile times are in the low 16s with speeds of around 85 mph through the traps. Not too exciting by the standards of just a few years back, but still impressive for a smog and converter-choked station wagon engine.

So the Trans Am may not be quite the race car it appears, but it's certainly as exciting a domestic car as you can buy these days (especially with a usable rear seat) and provided the most fun we've had with a big-engine road car in quite some time. ■