

Chevrolet Malibu Classic

With the F41 heavy-duty suspenders it's an absolute delight.

• Rays of hope have begun to shine brightly all over the American automotive landscape again. Enthusiasm is up, engineering is in, and cars we can love are popping up everywhere. One of the brightest spots this year is the intermediate class, home of the street sweepers that were once the most exciting and vital cars America produced. Well, it's happening all over again, and one of the prime movers in this driver's revolution is the Chevrolet Malibu Classic.

You remember the Malibu, don't you? Back in the Sixties it drew car freaks as strongly as Mecca draws Moslems, with the sheer magnetism of big-block power. But thanks to the fuel crisis, big blocks lost their vigor, and so did the Malibu. It faded to insignificance almost overnight. Robbed of the magic elixir of high horsepower, it became a dowdy old body-mover, leaving all of the intermediate-class glory to Olds-

mobile's mid-sized variant, the Cutlass.

But things have come round again, as they always seem to do, and now there is a Malibu that will make enthusiasts' hearts beat a whole lot quicker. These days, the driving force of excitement does not result from rocket-assisted takeoffs, but from an ability to go around curves with the panache and aplomb formerly reserved for European sports sedans. What we have here is the quintessential American road sedan, a born-again supercar that provides driving thrills while meeting its government-mandated fuel-economy and emissions obligations. The Malibu we are speaking of is the F41 sports version. Checking the box next to Regular Production Option F41 on the order form unleashes a mother lode of chassis magic that transforms an already good car into the best-handling intermediate that Chevy's

collective engineering mind can muster.

The Malibu F41 is not alone in its quest for new roads to conquer. This year, each purveyor of downsized intermediates or upsized compacts has fielded models that play distinct variations on Road Love, American Style. The Pontiac Grand Am, the Olds 442, the Buick Turbo Regal, and the Fairmont ESO/Zephyr ES Type are all new-generation supercars. The Malibu's particular twist on this new-for-1978 theme is that it soft-pedals its high-energy nature to near anonymity. All the other cars in this class use grilles, paint, wheels, or trim pieces that set them apart from their stablemates in order to create their sportier-than-thou identities. But you won't find so much as an F41 emblem on Chevy's mid-sized sports sedan. You wouldn't know an F41 Malibu if it ran right over you.



PHOTOGRAPHY: AARON KILEY
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Continued



Besides being this year's version of the Q-ship, the Malibu also offers you something rare these days: a four-speed manual transmission. Shades of the good ol' days—four-on-the-floor and a V-8. But before you build your hopes too high, you should know that even with the Malibu's most powerful 305-cubic-inch V-8, the F41 just flat isn't fast. When you make like Don Garlits, all you'll see on your time slips is 18.4-second quarters at 76.2 mph. And all the power shifts and smoky burn-outs in the world aren't going to improve on that.

But once you've adjusted your mind-set to today's reality, you'll be able to consider the Malibu in a calmer, more objective light. And that is good, because there is much virtue here.

It starts with the Malibu's basic structure, which is the same for all models, F41 or otherwise. The Malibu, of course, was downsized along with the rest of GM's intermediate fleet this past year. Low-carbohydrate engineering trimmed a foot in overall length from the older model, cut width by seven inches, and pared weight down to a svelte 3521 pounds—about 600 pounds less than last year's high-calorie version. Best of all, this was done with no sacrifice whatsoever in interior room or trunk space. Less bulk should mean more miles to the gallon, and the Malibu translates this theory into practice by returning 18.0 mpg in city driving and 20.5 mpg on the highway, as measured by our C/D driving cycle.

The efficient approach is apparent in the Malibu's bodywork as well as in its fuel-economy rating. Since room and comfort goals were set by GM corporate edict at 1977 levels, the new, smaller Malibu's form just had to follow its function. The

No Malibu ever dove for apexes with as much exuberance as the F41.

body that fit the bill is boxier than any past version, but it is nonetheless clean and taut. It bespeaks a leanness heretofore absent in an intermediate Chevy. The neatly creased lines and the smooth expanses of sheetmetal fit the Malibu's chassis like a freshly pressed European-cut suit. The Malibu coupe also benefits from a handsome notchback roof, shared only with Pontiac's LeMans series. Its thin pillars and large glass area imbue the whole car with an air of elegant grace.

Inside, the Malibu earns a full family-car rating. There is spread-out room in all directions, and six adults can travel for long stretches without the need for intensive body massage afterwards. It is also a

haven of tasteful design. The cloth-covered seats are simple and handsome, the dash is clean and functional-looking, and the quality of the materials is first-rate.

You sit more upright in this Malibu than in past models, but the seating is still not as chairlike as a Volvo's. Your view of the world is almost totally unimpeded, thanks to the thin roof pillars. The large glass area also creates an airy feeling that makes past opera-windowed models seem like tombs.

There's plenty of incentive for the serious driver in the F41's interior—provided he works the option sheet correctly. The optional gauge package is a must; it includes four silver-dollar-sized meters for fuel level, temperature, oil pressure, and volts, plus two larger gauges for speed and rpm. They are all well marked and are easily viewed through the molded vinyl wheel. Since there are no reclining seats available, the six-way power option helps you to cozy up to the steering wheel; the optional tilt wheel will fine-tune your driving position. The AM/FM stereo (add CB for smokey control) produces fine sounds for keeping you happy when traffic closes in. The optional electric sunroof is the best thing since convertibles, but be advised that it steals critical inches of headroom; if you're long of torso, fit yourself into a demo car before ordering it.

Thus equipped, the Malibu is long on American-style comfort, but it still needs a dose of human engineering. The chief offender is the seat, one of the key ingredients in any happy-motoring recipe. The park bench in our test car was comfortable enough for sedate highway cruising or around-town trolling and provided plenty of under-thigh support. But for Bimmer chasing, its woeful lack of lateral support has you white-knuckling the wheel just to



keep yourself on an even keel—never mind extracting the last iota out of the suspension. The optional buckets would be a good first step to better car—and body—control. A column-mounted lever for the wipers and washers would keep dashboard groping to a minimum (the brights are controlled with the turn-signal lever). Other than these few complaints, things are generally harmonious in the cabin.

The qualities noted so far make all Malibus easygoing and pleasant to live with. But it is the F41 sports package that will turn friendship into love. The package consists of a comprehensive suspension upgrading plus a group of "mandatory options," which include the 305-cubic-inch V-8, power steering, power brakes, and your choice of the Turbo Hydra-matic or the four-speed manual transmission.

The F41 suspension was available on the 1978 Malibu, but has been completely revised for the 1979 cars. We can vouch for the improvement because the Midnight Special you see posed on these pages is actually a Chevrolet Engineering evaluation car—a 1978 Malibu with next year's suspension secreted away underneath.

To make this new package, Chevy has upped the front and rear spring rates 35 and 40 percent respectively above standard. A 32mm front anti-sway bar replaces the standard 27mm unit, and a 20mm bar is added to the rear suspension. Shock-absorber calibrations are tightened up and matched to this spring-bar combination. Body mounts are stiffened to reduce the time lag between the chassis's turning and the body's following. Harder upper-control-arm bushings locate the rear axle more firmly. A host of changes quicken steering response: A nonvariable-ratio steering box replaces the standard variable-ratio unit, and a high-effort spool valve is substituted in the power booster. Harder anti-sway-bar grommets and higher-rate control-arm bushings reduce unwanted movement in the front suspension members. Chevy engineers are no strangers to racing cars, so they understand the value of a stiff chassis for making the suspension more effective. They've stiffened up the F41 chassis with braces that run from the front frame rails to the engine crossmember. But their best tweak is transforming the front bumper into an additional crossmember for extra stiffness. This is accomplished by installing a keyway in the bumper energy-absorbing shafts to keep them from rotating when the chassis flexes. Where the rubber meets the road the F41 also gets special treatment, a set of P205/70R-14 "Monte Carlo" tires mounted on 6-by-14-inch steel wheels. No



Gauges you can read, pedals you can heel-and-toe, and enough room for a little-league team make the Malibu the essential All-American road car.

other Malibu benefits from 70-series tires.

The essence of the Sixties supercar mystique was tire-melting acceleration, mind-bending torque, and vision-blurring speed from engines as big as a house and carburetors the size of trash cans. Standing in the shadow of these hairy behemoths, the F41's 305-cubic-inch V-8, with its tiny two-barrel carburetor, looks stoop-shouldered and wimpy. But in today's performance context, it is an adequate performer, providing a zero-to-sixty acceleration of 10.8 seconds and a top speed of 110 mph. Chevy does build a more powerful four-barrel version of the 305, but because of the vagaries of interdivisional politics, not fully understood by mortals, Chevrolet sells that engine to Olds for use in the 442. Because of a carburetor shortage, there are no four-barrels left for Malibu engines. Still the Malibu acquires itself well in normal driving because the 305 has a knack

for feeling more muscular than it really is. It pulls smoothly and quietly from 1500 rpm right up to its five-grand redline—though power does flatten after about 4500 rpm. Unfortunately the engine is happier with the automatic than it is with the four-speed in our test car.

The problem is not so much the transmission but the tall 2.73:1 axle-drive ratio, which requires excessive clutch slipping to get off smoothly. It's as if you were starting in second gear. Exacerbating the situation is the motor's one drivability flaw: a bad cough just under 1000 rpm. If you let out the clutch too fast and drop the revs under a grand, you'll lurch away from lights like a drivers'-ed student. Around town you use the shifter almost like a final-drive selector, because with 48 mph available in first you barely need anything else. When you tire of the transmission's whining—the only Sixties déjà vu in the whole

car—you just dial up a quieter gear and let the torque ease you along. The shifting process is a light and precise operation, so long as you don't rush things, but the launching problems kill all the fun. Unless you're a confirmed do-it-yourselfer, opt for the automatic.

Even then you'll have to develop a light touch and lots of sensitivity to the controls to take an F41 to the limit. All of the feedback seems to pass through a filter that removes the harshness and a good portion of the feel. This condition is not greatly different from that of most American cars, but less anesthesia would be appreciated.

The steering, though higher in effort than the standard Malibu's, is still relatively light and not nearly as direct as the best GM system, the Trans Am's. Nor is its self-centering action strong enough to provide you with much feedback. Its slightly numbed feel never lets you forget there is a booster between you and the front tires. Yet it answers your commands as if it were wired into your nervous system. When you turn the wheel, the Malibu cuts better than Mercury Morris on his best days. No slop, no waiting, no indecision. Just immediate, reassuring response, the equal of any Euro-sedan you care to name.

Much the same can be said of the brakes. They are spongy and vague, with little feedback, but they pull you down like Crazy Glue. If you ease them on to avoid lockup, they'll stop you from 70 mph in 194 feet, an impressive 0.84 g (which is right there with such notables as the BMW 733i and the Ferrari 308GTS).

The handling places the F41 in the American car elite, though you wouldn't know it if you only saw the Malibu negotiating the C/D skidpad. It made a concerted effort to grind its front tires to rubber dust with a truckload of understeer, recording a middling 0.72 g in the process. But on the slalom course and out on the road it was more in its element. In transient maneuvers the Malibu is agile, with minimal tail wag. Dive toward a turn, lean on the brakes hard, and roll the side of your foot onto the gas as you downshift. Amazingly, the pedals are adequately placed for heel-and-toeing. Turn in and the Malibu cuts for the apex right now. The tail starts to move out and you add power to keep it there (but thanks to the Bonneville gearing, you always seem to be a cog too high). Body roll is at a minimum, and the Malibu hunkers down and claws its way around. Bumps and ripples that would have the rear end of most solid-axle cars lurching sideways will only cause the Malibu's tail to take a polite sidestep. And be-

fore you can unwind the wheel to correct for the tail wag, the car has locked itself back on course. The ability of the F41 to change direction is really quite special, and it takes some time before you stop underestimating its ability. After a couple of hours of back-road bashing, your only wish is for a better seat, and your only prayer is for a self-righteous sports sedan to tangle with.

Like the better European road cars, the F41 sacrifices little in the way of ride to bring you its excellent handling. Over most surfaces the ride is almost as soft as a standard Malibu's. On smooth roads the F41 is positively silky. Tar strips and pavement cracks can be seen but not felt, and the body-frame construction soaks up the granular feel of the road surface. On wavy pavement the Malibu exhibits a taut, well-damped ride. But on moonscape inner-city

avenues the stiff rear springs can make the ride a bit bouncy.

Despite this one small flaw in the Malibu's manners, it rates an A-plus as an all-purpose enthusiast's car. It gobbles up Interstates with excellent straight-line stability and good crosswind resistance. It encourages hurrying on switchbacks and on-ramps. And yet it's able to swallow a whole family and their luggage, and deposit them unruffled at their chosen destination hours later.

In short, the Malibu F41 is the kind of car that enthusiasts have been begging Detroit to build for years—comfortable, efficient, balanced, handsome, affordable, and a ball to drive. So we can stop looking back at the Malibus of old. The 1979 F41 will surely become a legend in its own time.

—Rich Ceypon

COUNTERPOINT:

• New York City being the worst place for cars this side of New Guinea, it's always interesting to see how a highly touted car behaves here. The ones that work best are usually imported, usually from Germany, and usually have four-wheel independent suspension. Certainly the standard American sedan, with its soft springs, lack of suspension travel, and throwaway shocks, is no match for the city's lunar surface. But Chevrolet has already shown in its downsized big cars that traditional Detroit suspension doesn't have to be flaccid, and its F41 sports option puts an even finer point on it. The Malibu coupe with its version of F41 really managed New York awfully well. The car was stable and compliant in the hellholes and still smoked through corners on country roads the way all cars ought to. Its little engine meant little acceleration, but the sport was all there on curvy roads. The car's a wonderful size, and probably the best looking of all the GM intermediates. Its gear ratios were badly chosen—in fact it would have been better with an automatic—but everything else about it came up roses. The Chevy Malibu and the F41 suspension were meant for each other.

—David E. Davis, Jr.

This Malibu is just about a great car. I'm prepared to disregard the styling, which suggests to me a first-round loser in a Mercedes look-alike contest. And I won't be too critical of the lousy throttle response, which makes smooth shifting impossible, simply because a four-speed manual transmission behind an engine with a torque curve as flat as Nebraska is a pretty silly combination in the first place.

But I cannot say enough good things about the car's handling. This is the first sol-

id-axle American sedan I've driven that didn't try to do a mazurka over bumpy roads, and the steering cuts as fine as that of any power-assisted import you can buy. Beyond this, the Malibu is rare in that it can generate high cornering forces with a relatively soft suspension. There is nothing at all punishing about the ride quality until you get into the serious bumps, at which time the body pitches smartly into the front jounce bumpers and the car loses all semblance of aplomb. So, for really rough roads, M-Bs and BMWs are still better than the Malibu, but we can all take some pride in the fact that Chevrolet is catching up.

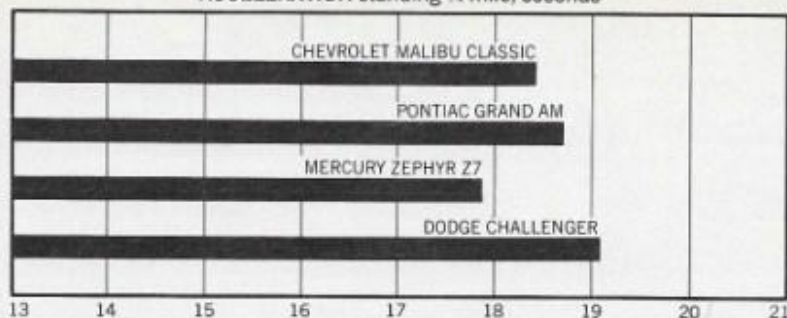
—Patrick Bedard

The Chevrolet Malibu is America's best sports sedan by default. If you want a car with a real back seat, a V-8 engine, and a four-speed transmission, there are but seven nameplates that offer such a combination. Six of these are hopelessly overweight and far too clumsy to corner with any competence, so the new-generation Malibu rises to the head of its class virtually unchallenged.

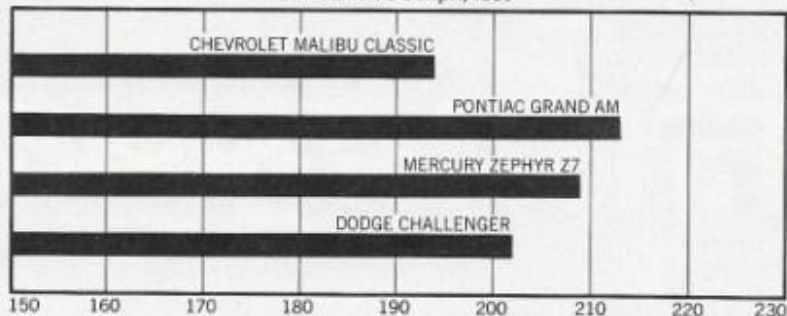
That's not to say it's a wonderful car. At best, this year's new Chevy should be considered a nice kit from the factory. All the parts are here, but they need work. The tires ride well, but don't stick; the engine is smooth and efficient, but anemic; the steering is sensitive, but the suspension lets the body tip precipitously in the turns. You get the idea. The Malibu, even with the F41 suspension, has potential that only aftermarket parts and long sessions under the shade tree will release. Pontiac engineers did almost all the right things to their Grand Am CA (C/D, June 1978), and under the skin, it's the same car as the Malibu. Let their experience be your guide.

—Don Sherman

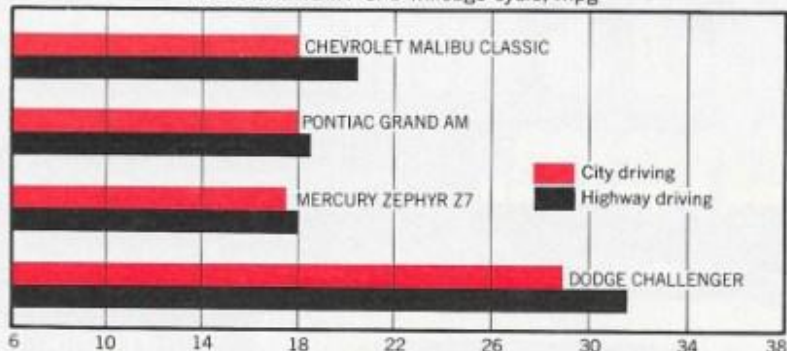
ACCELERATION standing 1/4 mile, seconds



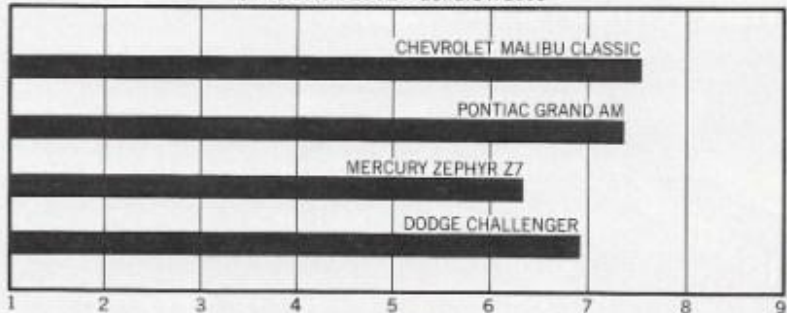
BRAKING 70-0 mph, feet



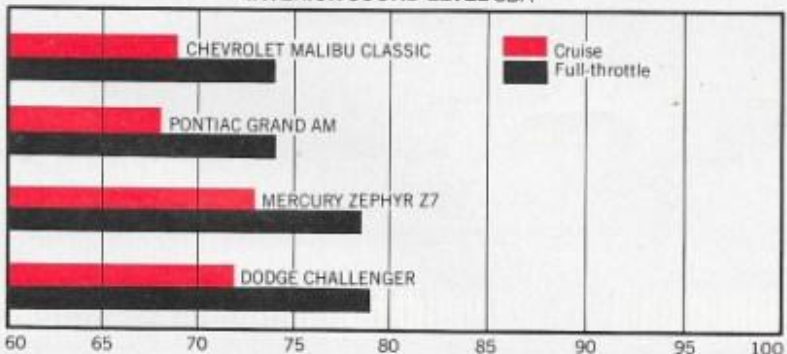
FUEL ECONOMY C/D mileage cycle, mpg



PRICE AS TESTED dollars x 1000



INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL dBA



CHEVROLET MALIBU CLASSIC

Manufacturer: Chevrolet Motor Division
General Motors Corporation
Warren, Michigan 48090

Vehicle type: front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 6-passenger 2-door sedan

Price as tested: \$7552

(Manufacturer's suggested retail price, including all options listed below, dealer preparation and delivery charges, does not include state and local taxes, license or freight charges)

Options on test car: base Malibu Classic, \$4461; 305 V-8, \$190; 4-speed manual transmission, \$125; P205/70R-14 tires, (price not available); power steering, \$152; power brakes, \$69; air conditioning, \$544; instrumentation, \$118; F41 handling package, \$38; power skyroof, \$499; 6-way power seat, \$151; power windows, \$124; power door locks, \$80; tilt wheel, \$69; AM/FM stereo radio, \$229; vinyl roof, \$116; Positraction differential, \$60; rear-window defogger, \$92; sport mirrors, \$33; pinstripe, \$48; sport wheel covers, \$49; intermittent wipers, \$32; deluxe seatbelts, \$21; tinted glass, \$62; body side moldings, \$53; floor mats, \$20; deluxe luggage-compartment trim, \$41; bumper guards, \$40; bumper rub strips, \$36.

ENGINE

Type: V-8, water-cooled, cast-iron block and heads, 5 main bearings
Bore x stroke 3.74 x 3.48 in, 94.9 x 88.4mm
Displacement 305.8 cu in, 5006cc
Compression ratio 8.4 to one
Carburetion 1x2-bbl Rochester Dualjet
Power (SAE net) 145 bhp @ 3800 rpm
Torque (SAE net) 245 lbs-ft @ 2400 rpm
Max. recommended engine speed 5000 rpm

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission 4-speed, all-synchro
Final drive ratio 2.73 to one

Gear	Ratio	Mph/1000 rpm	Max. test speed
I	2.85	9.7	48 mph (5000 rpm)
II	2.02	13.7	68 mph (5000 rpm)
III	1.35	20.4	102 mph (5000 rpm)
IV	1.00	27.6	110 mph (4000 rpm)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase 108.1 in
Track, F/R 58.5/57.8 in
Length 192.7 in
Width 69.9 in
Height 53.3 in
Curb weight 3521 lbs
Weight distribution, F/R 56.8/43.2%

SUSPENSION

F: .ind. unequal-length control arms, coil springs, anti-sway bar
R: rigid axle, 4 trailing links, coil springs, anti-sway bar

STEERING

Type recirculating ball, power-assisted
Turns lock-to-lock 3.1
Turning circle curb-to-curb 37.2 ft

BRAKES

F: 10.3-in vented disc, power-assisted
R: 9.5 x 2.0-in cast-iron finned drum, power-assisted

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size 6.0 x 14-in
Tire make and size Goodyear Custom Polysteel Radial
P205/70R-14
Test inflation pressures, F/R 26/26 psi

PERFORMANCE

Zero to	Seconds
30 mph	3.4
40 mph	5.1
50 mph	7.7
60 mph	10.8
70 mph	15.1
80 mph	21.1

Standing 1/4-mile 18.4 sec @ 76.2 mph
Top speed (observed) 110 mph
70-0 mph 194 ft (0.84 g)
Fuel economy, C/D mileage cycle 18.0 mpg, urban driving
20.5 mpg, highway driving