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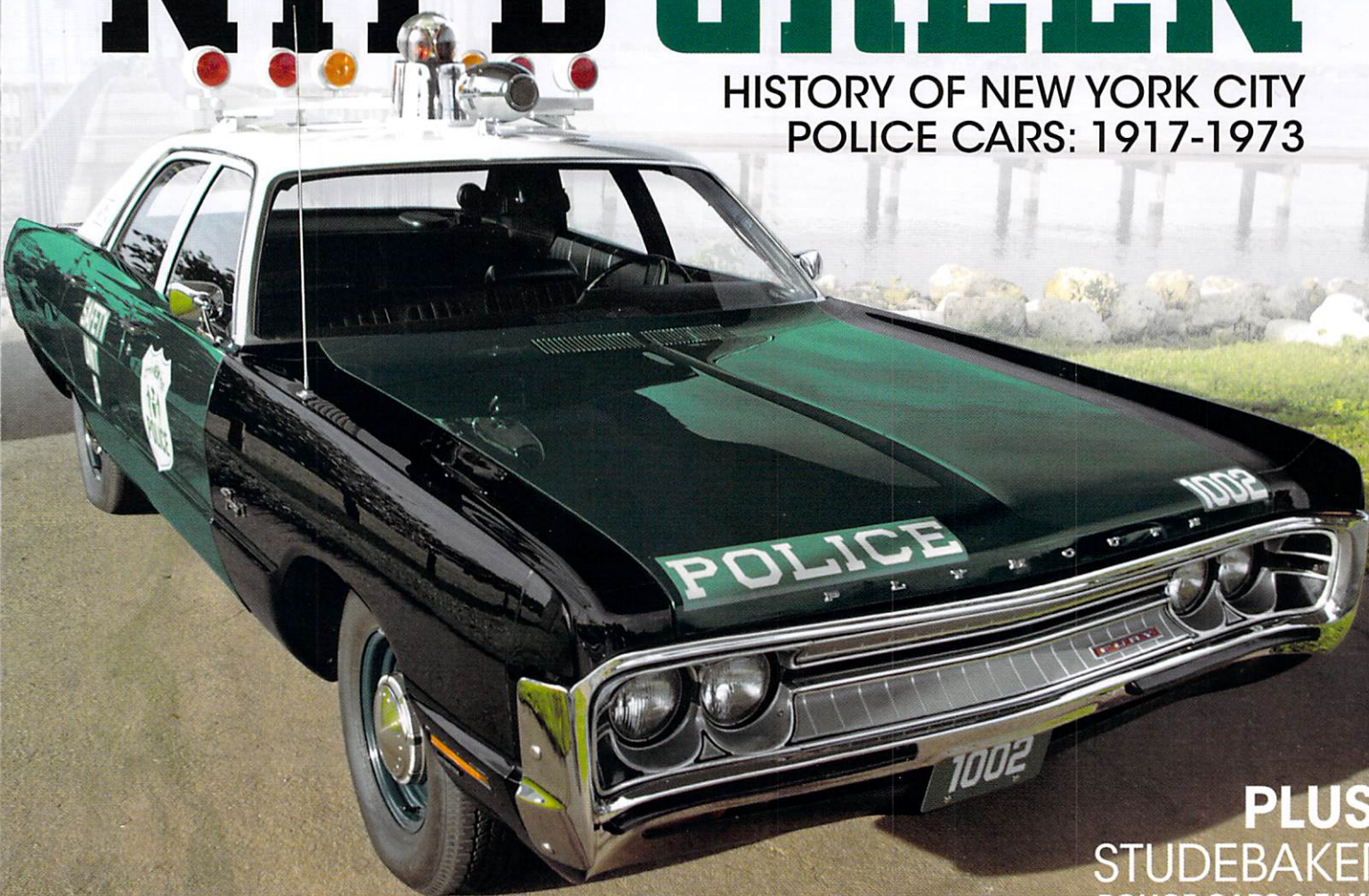
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Furious Justice

*Replicating a classic 1971 Plymouth
New York City police car*

BY JIM DONNELLY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD LENTINELLO

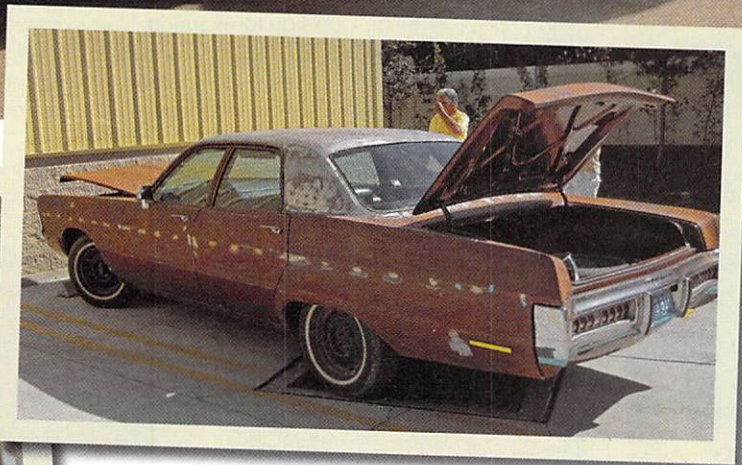


John Vliet Lindsay was in deep trouble in 1971, which meant that the city he governed as mayor, New York, was doing even worse. Municipal strikes had halted mass transit and left mounds of stinking garbage clogging the streets. Members of the Weather Underground had blown themselves to bits when their clandestine Greenwich Village bomb factory exploded.

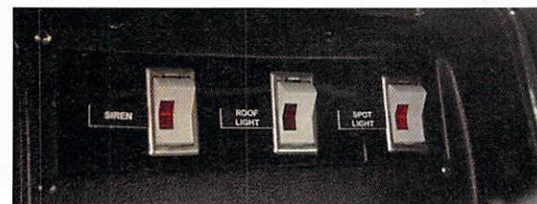
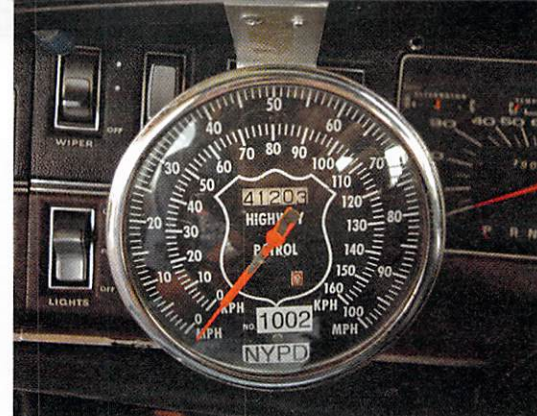
A smoke-blackened firefighter named Dennis Smith was about to publish a best-seller about the warlike danger he and his brother firemen faced in the South Bronx. Lindsay was preparing to switch parties and suffer a humiliating repudiation as a presidential candidate. The New York Giants, which were still actually in New York, finished dead last in the NFC East. And a

group of self-styled revolutionaries was fatally ambushing officers to make some point about Leninist or Maoist philosophies.

Amidst all this turmoil, one constant endured in the great five boroughs. The Police Department of the City of New York still patrolled its streets in navy blue, double-breasted tunics with brass buttons, and did so in vehicles painted green, black



The owner (right) always wanted a car that replicated his first RMP after he joined the NYPD. The donor car was a very clean 1971 Fury III that was downgraded to a Fury I, with new badges and smaller taillamps. The vinyl roof was likewise shorn.



All this gear still exists if you know where to look for it. Telephone handsets were standard for NYPD radios. Switch panel allowed driver to activate siren with the horn buttons. Speedometer was salvaged from a Highway Patrol RMP wrecked during a Parkway pursuit.

and white. Despite a historic corruption scandal in 1971, most NYPD cops did so proudly, defiantly, bravely. This Plymouth Fury I four-door is a tribute to that era.

Right up front, it's a replica, albeit a strongly authentic one. If you're a collector who's into the history of motorized police transportation, a recreation might be your only option, as we'll examine in a moment. Suspended disbelief is a necessity. But for the guy who built this Fury, it's as powerful a piece of nostalgia as could possibly exist.

Jim Serra wanted a talisman to remember his entry into the nation's largest law enforcement agency, which when he accepted his shield in 1970 was some 22,000 sworn officers strong. Jim rose through the ranks to become a sergeant and a lieutenant, serving mostly in Manhattan precincts before retiring and moving to coastal Florida. He wanted to re-create one of the patrol cars—a Radio Motor Patrol or “RMP,” in NYPD-speak—from an early duty assignment, a specialized Manhattan precinct known as Safety Unit B. As Jim explains its mission, Safety Unit B was located at 6th Avenue and 30th Street in Midtown, a few blocks away from Madison Square Garden, and covered all of lower Manhattan from 96th Street south, and from river to river. Its police officers were tasked with “responding to incidents including crane collapses, building collapses, fires, demonstrations, presidential visits, the Democratic National Convention and managing big events like the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade and the New York City Marathon,” Jim explains.

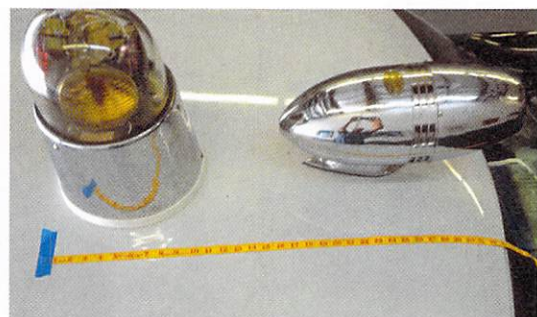
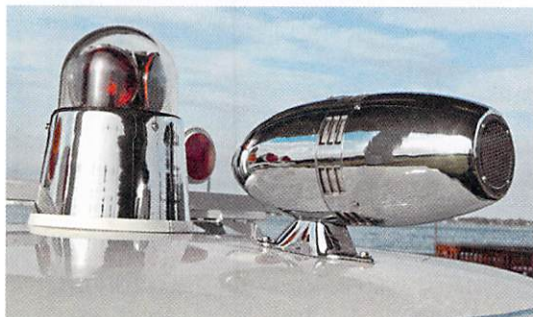
The majority of officers in the unit handled calls, and when they weren’t, did normal proactive police stuff like patrolling the

streets, conducting motor vehicle stops and making “collars”—arrests. In terms of having a patrol car, you didn’t need much, and NYPD uniforms didn’t get it. There were never any “police package” cars in the NYPD per se, certainly not in the sense of the North Carolina Highway Patrol, or any other agency for which long-distance pursuits and emergency runs were commonplace.

When malefactors were chased in New York City, including by Safety Unit B, it was usually by a cop on foot or maybe perched astride a little Lambretta or Vespa motor scooter. In almost all cases, a full-on brawny patrol car—think a Ford Police Interceptor with a 428, or a 440-cu.in. Mopar—made no sense whatsoever for the NYPD. Most RMPs patrolled at 10 to 15 MPH. The cars were denuded: zero options, no prisoner cages, six-cylinder power with automatics (eventually). They were taxis that were painted green instead of yellow.

That’s why many “restored” police cars, especially those from the NYPD, are actually replicas. To re-create his Safety Unit B car, Jim located a 1971 Plymouth Fury III sedan in Tennessee that had logged only 27,000 actual miles. For an RMP, it was wrong on several counts, the most obvious being that as a near-top-of-the-line car, it was way too luxurious. Adjustments were made cosmetically as Jim issued it new badges for a Fury I, a process that required changing the rear bumper to one with the more severe-and-simplified Fury I taillamps.

“Being that I used to work in that unit, and we’d work all the parades, like the St. Patrick’s Day parade, a lot of police departments would bring their own (restored) vehicles into the city



High-mounted Federal beacon with two-colored lamps was standard, like the shrieking Pulsator siren. Each was positioned on the Fury III using measurements from the NYPD shops. Patrol car’s number, 1002, comes from the sergeant’s badge number of the owner.

and run them in the parade," Jim recalls. "I never had the time, the money or the space to work on them until I retired and moved to Florida. I've wanted to do it for about 30 years, but was never able to try until then. I thought about a 1971 Plymouth because when I came on the job and first got into a patrol car, that was the kind of car we had. I also wanted a car that was built after 1968, so it would have a dual master cylinder. Plus, my Fury has front disc brakes."

The other major departures from "real" on Jim's Fury, for a normal precinct RMP, are its factory air conditioning and the new-for-1971, two-barrel V-8 displacing 360 cubic inches, slotting it between the 318 and the 383, an upsized 340 that was part of Chrysler's LA engine family. As Jim explains, those engines might have found their way into a few Fury sedans assigned to NYPD Highway Patrol precincts, those being the most likely to be involved in serious pursuits. Speaking of which, the circular calibrated speedometer in Jim's car was salvaged from a Highway Patrol unit that got flipped during a chase along the Belt Parkway in Brooklyn.

Jim's Plymouth replicates an RMP that would have been well-equipped for 1971. The standard siren at the time was a bi-tone electromechanical Federal Signals Pulsator, and was so deafening it was eventually banned under city noise-abatement codes. Jim bought his from a collector and dealer named Joe Dorgan from Tucson, Arizona. Behind it is a Federal Beacon Ray Model 175H with a clear dome, red and amber bulbs, and a raised chrome base so the light clears the siren. That piece was a gift from a fellow former officer also living now in Florida. There are also hinged "high rise" blinkers that pivot upward from either side of the Fury for visibility at accident scenes, long a common warning system on NYPD cars that handled traffic



“I thought about a 1971 Plymouth because when I came on the job and first got into a patrol car, that was the kind of car we had.”

work. The Motorola radio and speaker came from an online collector. Jim figures he has about \$400 in the authentic emergency gear.

Jim's a car guy, having owned and restored other eye-poppers ranging from an International Harvester high-wheeler to a Willys Aero. As a Fury III, the Plymouth had a vinyl roof that was in perfect shape but still had to be removed. So were the excess body moldings that a police car would never sport. The decals were furnished by an Illinois shop that had the correct fonts and color capability to custom-produce them. The most critical part of the conversion, however, was getting the color codes right. White and black are no big deal, but the green's got to be dead on. The current match is Envision Green, a Du Pont color that was originally used on Suzuki automobiles. It's perfect for NYPD green going all the way back to the 1930s.

"The black is never a problem," Jim says. "Driving in the city, the part most likely to get scraped or banged up were the front fenders. That paint was easy to match. Black is black."

An NYPD RMP had a short and thankless existence back in '71. Cruise past a precinct house and RMPs would be parked haphazardly, sometimes on the sidewalk, fenders and quarter panels mottled from countless dings and/or close encounters with cabs. Other than the paint scheme, about the only concessions to the RMPs' status as police vehicles were the warning lights, roof-mounted siren and a simple Motorola analog radio. "They ran 24 hours a day. Basically, after four years, they were completely used up and sold for scrap, or taken down for parts. The only restored ones around now that actually were original New York City police cars might be the ones in the NYPD Museum, and I can't even verify that."

