

reporter James Bacon observed, "What Liberace is to older women and what Elvis is to young girls, Welk is to middle-aged married couples—the income group that buys most automobiles." Dodge had hit the jackpot.

The 1956 Dodge sprouted fins and new four-door hardtops, and lifesize cardboard cutouts of Lawrence Welk sprang up in Dodge showrooms. Dealers gave away color booklets featuring the Welk orchestra. When Welk and the Champagne Music Makers played on the road, fans got their tickets at Dodge dealers. Touring Texas in 1956, the Welk orchestra traveled in a cavalcade of Dodge convertibles. Eighty thousand fans attended the shows over 11 days. *The Billboard* said, "Welk is 'Dodge' wherever he goes."

On air, Champagne Lady Alice Lon sang the praises of a Custom Royal Lancer convertible to the tune of "Camptown Races":

*There's Jet-Fin styling, many a thrill.
New Dodge! New Dodge!
Broke all records at Bonneville.
Get a brand new Dodge today.*

In September 1955, Dodge and AAA officials pulled a random 1956 Custom Royal sedan off the assembly line, then took the unmodified car to the Bonneville Salt Flats for a 14-day endurance run. Test drivers Danny Eames, Ak Miller, and Betty Skelton piloted it in four-hour shifts. Together they drove 31,224 miles at an average of 92.86 mph and set a total of 306 records along the way. When Dodge bragged about its performance at Bonneville, ad copy claimed, "It's the same car you yourself can buy today, powered by our new 230-horsepower V-8 engine," though neglecting to point out that represented an upgrade from the 218 bhp available from the 315-cid engine that came standard in Royals and Customs.

The following December, Dodge introduced a high-performance D-500 package. It boasted a 260-bhp 315-cid V-8 with "hemi" heads (as opposed to the standard polyspheric heads), 9.25:1 compression, mechanical lifters for the larger valves, big Carter four-barrel carburetor, low-restriction air cleaner, and double-breaker distributor to fire the special short-reach spark plugs. The package also included heavy-duty springs and shocks that lowered ride height, 12-inch-diameter heavy-duty brakes, and uprated steering components. A choice of camshafts (one designed for torque, the other

designed for top speed) and a selection of rear-axle ratios allowed the D-500's performance-minded patrons to tailor a car to their specific needs.

Dodge introduced the D-500 on three models: the Coronet two-door sedan, Custom Royal two-door hardtop, and Custom Royal convertible. Starting in March '56, any new Dodge could be had with the full complement of D-500 gear

(which would have made for an incongruously macho La Femme)—or just the 260-horse engine minus the heavy-duty suspension parts. This set the pattern for D-500 options into the early Sixties, which were confined to chestier engines.

In April, Dodge announced the Golden Lancer, another spring-special trim package that draped any two-door hardtop in Sapphire White-over-Gallant Gold



1, 2. Ideas for the 1956 facelift were photographed on June 14, 1954. Note the roof overhang on the driver's side. The rear fin and taillight treatment is surprisingly similar to that of the 1955 Cadillac Eldorado. 3. Ten days later, less-fussy side trim was viewed on the other side of the model. 4, 5. By July 27, the fins and taillamps were getting closer to their eventual form, but the side trim, body sculpturing, and grille were still evolving. The production '56 Dodge would ultimately continue the divided-grille style instituted for 1955.