

By BRADLEY IGER JULY 11, 2017

For most folks, performance isn't a descriptor that immediately springs to mind when considering the Studebaker brand. With a market share that was simply dwarfed by the Big Three, Studebaker strategized its development efforts toward volume-selling vehicles that championed the automaker's reputation for affordable, reliable motoring that would get its customers from Point A to Point B, a focus that would only increase after the company's merger with Packard in 1953.



Perhaps no other car in the company's history better exemplified that unassuming and sensible design approach than the Lark. Introduced in 1959, the Lark would sell over 130,000 units in its first year on sale despite the fact that most of the vehicle was based on off-the-shelf parts and the central body section of the Lark could be traced all the way back to Studebaker's 1953 models.

The Lark's initial sales success put some momentum into Studebaker's prospects going in the 1960s, but the Big Three quickly responded with economical compact models of their own, which severely impacted Lark sales the following year.

John DeLorean is often credited as being the driving force behind the "big engine, small car" concept that would be used to great effect with the 1964 Pontiac GTO, a model which is often credited as jump starting the musclecar craze. But Studebaker was working on this idea long before GM began development in earnest. Interestingly, prior to his gig at General Motors, DeLorean had served as the head of research and development for Packard, a company which merged with Studebaker in 1954.

Around the same time Sherwood Egbert took the helm of the company after being poached from McCulloch, the parent company of Paxton. Faced with a dire financial forecast unless drastic measures were taken, Egbert immediately fast tracked the development of the Avanti, a car which the company would later advertise as “America’s Only Four Passenger High-Performance Personal Car.” And in order for the Avanti to have any credibility with the motoring public, it would need some potent hardware underneath its curvaceous bodywork.

But being the cost-minded company that Studebaker was, those parts would need to be interchangeable with other models in the automaker’s lineup, including the Lark. This would in turn result in the R2 Super Lark: A supercharged, V8-powered Studebaker coupe that could be optioned with a four-speed gearbox as well as a host of high performance options. Though its production run would be tragically short and under-publicized, the Super Lark embodied all the hallmarks of the musclecar formula well before General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler had planted their flags in the segment.



While the Avanti development program would serve as the push needed to get serious performance on to the Lark’s options sheet, Studebaker’s efforts to create potent hardware for their vehicles goes back much further. The company introduced their first V8 in 1951, a 232-cube mill with thick casting that offered room to grow, and by 1957 its displacement was already up to 289 inches.

Studebaker had also designed the motor to withstand extreme pressures that allowed for a compression ratio of up to 15.0:1, which made the power plant a great candidate for forced induction.



Though much of the Lark's underpinnings could be traced back to the early 1950s, its simplicity and compact proportions gave it a curb weight similar to that of Studebaker's Avanti sports car.

Images: Mecum

These 289 ci motors would find their way into Studebaker's Golden Hawk, the company's first real effort toward establishing a performance model. By 1958, the Golden Hawk's 289 could be optioned with a McCulloch centrifugal supercharger that was good for 5-7 psi and bumped the motor's output up to 275 horsepower.

Studebaker would end up acquiring the Paxton company not long after, yielding them an in-house source for future forced induction developments.

All of this bode well for the Lark, but Studebaker's focus in terms of high performance was initially aimed squarely at the upcoming Avanti coupe. Featuring flowing fiberglass bodywork, a 2 + 2 seating configuration and an available blown V8 hooked to a four speed manual gearbox, the Avanti was Studebaker's answer to established domestic performance icons like the Corvette.

But the Avanti was going to have to step up Studebaker's performance game even further in order to sway buyers away from Chevrolet show rooms.

Accordingly, Studebaker's chief engine engineer, Eugene Hardig, got to work revising the 289 V8 for use in the upcoming halo car. The motor already boasted a forged crankshaft and forged connecting rods, as well as a 3.5625-inch bore and 3.625-inch stroke that offered a great foundation for building performance, but there was room for improvement.

New aluminum timing gears replaced the fiber pieces previously used, and a new camshaft, high performance dual-point distributor, a larger harmonic balancer, and a Carter AFB four barrel carburetor would also help bolster the motor's capability.



R3 Clone

Although it's a rare sight, there's still a few examples out there that mix it up at drag strips across the country today, like this Super Lark clone. Image: Mr Anderson's Tech Blog

These modifications would comprise the revisions destined for the naturally aspirated version of the motor, denoted as the R1. The R2 mill would serve as the top-spec option, and along with its Paxton SN-60 fixed-ratio supercharger it would receive large-chamber cylinder heads from the company's truck line, giving the boosted R2-powered Avanti an output figure of 289 horsepower and 303 pound-feet of torque upon its debut in May of 1962.

Production issues would keep the new fiberglass-bodied Avanti from having any significant street presence throughout the rest of 1962. But in the meantime, Studebaker noticed that the R1 and R2 motors would easily fit in the Lark since the Avanti was based on a modified version of that platform. These "Jet Thrust" engines would grace the options sheet for the Lark for 1963.

Although the power generated by the Paxton-supercharged 289ci would be eclipsed by offerings from the Big Three a few years later, when the R2-powered Lark hit the streets in 1962 it was arguably the most potent compact model available anywhere.

132 **140**
mph mph

Two New Cars are Born

*Avanti-inspired...
Bonneville-tested!*
**R2 SUPER LARK
R2 SUPER HAWK**

We designed two new cars—and built a lot of our record-setting Avanti into them: supercharged R2 engines... heavy duty springs and shock absorbers, plus anti-sway bars, front and rear...trac rods, rear...racing type disc brakes, the safest known and ours alone.

We named them R2 Super Lark and R2 Super Hawk and had Andy Granatelli

take them out to the infamous Bonneville Salt Flats for final performance and endurance tests.

We could scarcely believe the results, but the official U.S. Auto Club timers confirmed them: R2 Super Lark—132 mph! R2 Super Hawk—140 mph! Two-way averages—under the most punishing weather and surface conditions. That kind of performance, combined

with their gentle 'round-town manners, told us these cars were ready. R2 Super Lark and R2 Super Hawk are now available on special order at your Studebaker dealer's.

Flash: front seat safety belts now come factory-installed on every car—another advance from Studebaker.

Studebaker
CORPORATION

See Page 15 for the other fine cars from Studebaker

Images: American Torque

Suddenly the relatively stodgy and unassuming Lark could be equipped with a supercharged, 290 horsepower V8 mated to a close-ratio Borg Warner four speed gearbox. And with its economy car origins the Lark was not weighed down with an overabundance of extraneous content or trim either, making it relatively light weight.

While Studebaker sorted out its production issues with the Avanti, engineer Andy Granatelli (who was the vice president of Paxton when Studebaker acquired the company) took to the Bonneville Salt Flats with supercharged Larks and Avantis and proceeded to set a host of U.S. Auto Club's speed records in a variety of classes.

Anxious to capitalize on the publicity and strike while the iron was hot, Studebaker created an optional High Performance Package for the Lark, which included power front disc brakes, a limited slip differential, high performance shocks, springs and sway bars, a heavy duty cooling system, a 160 mph speedometer, and other upgrades.

These examples would also gain a small fender badge that denoted them as the Super Lark, a moniker that Studebaker would promote through its advertising literature at the time.

Legacy

Unfortunately the R2-powered Studebaker Lark proved to be ahead of its time, and both it and the Avanti were simply too little, too late for the struggling Studebaker company. Despite the company's efforts to establish a high performance image for its new lineup, an internal power struggle within Studebaker would result in the sudden closure of the company's South Bend, Indiana factory late in 1963, which would effectively stop the production of all Lark platform-based vehicles, which included the Avanti and Hawk along with the Lark itself.

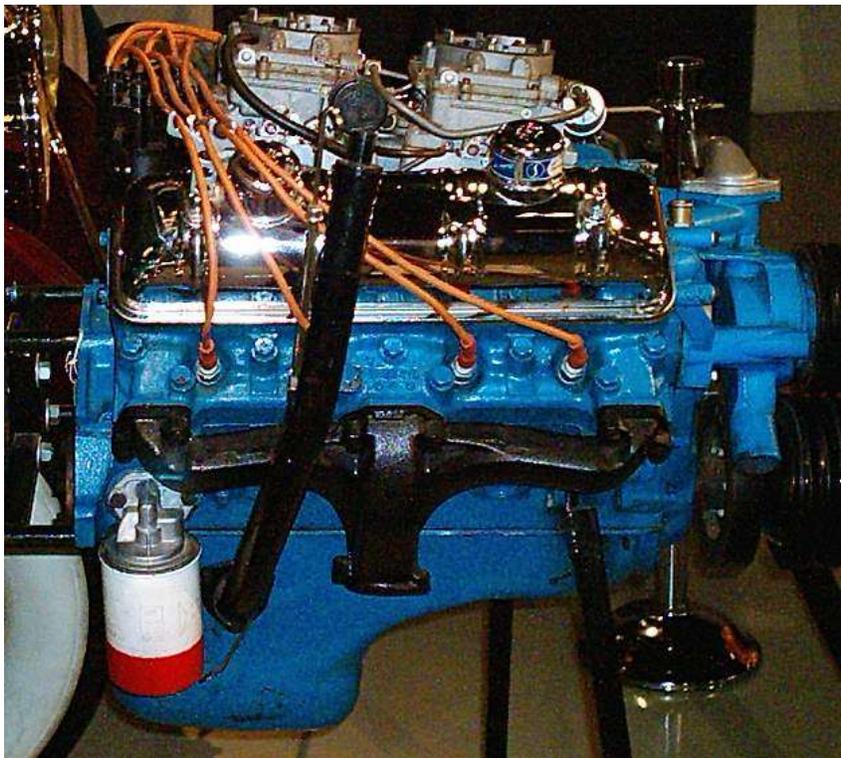
Just 325 R2-powered Larks were built in total, and among those, a mere 53 of them were optioned with the performance package that would denote them as Super Larks.



Just 325 supercharged Larks were built in total during the one-year production run.

Image: Hemmings

But before the Lark and any semblance of Studebaker's performance aspirations would fall off the map completely, Granatelli and his team would develop R3 and R4 variants of the V8 power plant in a Los Angeles shop in 1964.



A Studebaker R4 engine on display at the Studebaker National Museum. Image: Studebaker Drivers Club

Displacement was bumped up again, this time to 304.5 cubic inches to keep the motor under potential 305ci racing class displacement restrictions.

Equipped with the Paxton blower the motor reportedly churned out 335 horsepower, while the naturally aspirated version would receive higher compression and dual four-barrel AFB carburetors, a combination good for 280 horsepower. Roughly 120 of these engines were said to have been built, and only one was ever installed in a factory-produced vehicle.

With the Pontiac GTO and Ford Mustang hitting the streets not long after, the musclecar craze began to truly take shape. But the writing was already on the wall for Studebaker by then, and the company would cease producing vehicles entirely in March of 1966.

Due to their rarity and performance, the value of well-preserved Super Lark examples has gone up significantly over the years, and despite the Studebaker's relatively low profile versus the most potent Chrysler, GM and Ford models of the day, R2-powered Larks command a hefty sum at auction now – when you can find them at all.