

CHEVY BEL AIR HAS ALL ORIGINAL PARTS — EVEN THE SMELLY EXHAUST



BY RAY MAGLIOZZI

Dear Car Talk:

I have a pristine 1960 Chevrolet Bel Air. I am the second owner. It has 95,000 miles on a 348 motor with a Powerglide transmission. It's all original with no hotrod modifications. The car runs smooth as silk. I drive it two or three times a month to keep it exercised. But my daughter complains that if she follows me in her car when we go to car shows, the exhaust really smells bad. I have always used premium fuel in this car, and I drive it often enough that the gas is not particularly "old."

I know this car was built well before pollution controls were introduced, but I never remember car exhaust smelling remarkably bad as a kid. I have also noticed some of my vintage car show buddies have this issue with their 1950s-1960s cars. Why do the vintage cars have "pungent" exhausts? — Joe

I didn't remember old car exhaust smelling bad when I was a kid, either, Joe. But a few years ago, we were lucky enough to take a trip to Cuba to check out the old, American cars there. And guess what? Most of them stunk! I think, as the air has slowly gotten cleaner and cleaner over the course of our lives, we've all forgotten how bad it used to be.

Nowadays, if a car drives by that's got visible or malodorous exhaust, it stands out like a sore Edsel. Back then, most cars did that. Between 1960 and today, we've added fuel injection, computerized engine

controls, oxygen sensors, catalytic converters and more, to the point where you could put your nose next to the tail pipe of a new car and not smell anything — but please don't, unless you want to end up as dumb as me.

The carburetor on your car, in contrast, is the technological equivalent of pouring gasoline into the cylinders from a paint can. It's sloppy, imprecise and dirty. Now, it's possible that there's also something wrong with your Bel Air. And the problem most likely to make your exhaust even stinkier than usual is a fuel mixture that's too rich.

So, if your carburetor jets, for instance, are all worn out after only 60 years, they could be pouring way too much gasoline into the cylinders. The engine wouldn't be able to burn that extra fuel, and — without any emissions equipment — it would all come right out the tailpipe.

And it would stink. There are other things that can cause incomplete combustion and a rich mixture: low compression, incorrect timing, low engine operating temperature or a weak spark. It's probably worth checking all of them.

But my first guess would be the carburetor. And it's probably not too early in this car's life to replace the carburetor, Joe. That may very well improve the odor to some degree. If that still doesn't improve the smell to your daughter's satisfaction, you start following her to the car shows.

Got a question about cars? Write to Ray in care of King Features, 628 Virginia Drive, Orlando, FL 32803, or email by visiting the Car Talk website at www.cartalk.com.

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