

Take better photos of your car, today

Thomas A. DeMauro

4



The focal length of the lens makes a difference in the perspective of the photo. Notice how the Judge looks compressed in this photo (in a good way). Its background appears to be fairly close to it and the Pontiac's proportions appear to be equal front to rear. The focal length is 70mm, but since it was taken with a Canon 60D that has a 1.6:1 lens crop factor, the field of view is more like 112mm. Photos by author.

The blog I wrote on action shots a few weeks ago was fun to do, but by-and-large, most people will be taking static photos of their own cars much more often than photographing them in action.

Since the show season is coming to a close in many areas of the country and the leaves are turning pretty colors, you may want to take a few photos of your favorite vintage ride before it gets too cold and gray outside. To that end, here are a few tips that may help make those photos look better than they would have, had you not read this blog.

One thing to remember is not to simply take one photo for each angle that you want. Take photos in groups (ie. bracketing) using slightly different exposures, different focal lengths to vary the perspective, different F-stops to vary the depth-of-field, and/or different camera positions (high up, eye level, ground level etc.) to vary the angles.

Experiment and have fun with the process—it doesn't cost any more money—like it did in the film days. You took the time to read this blog, clean the car and find a suitable background. Now make the most of it by taking lots of photos. You'll be amazed at how different your car may look from one photo to the next just by making a simple adjustment.

These tips are basic, but they can have a large positive impact on the final images. If you have some additional ideas for making our car photos better, share them here. Happy shooting.

Background:

Choose a background that accentuates the vehicle. Backgrounds that typically work include: open fields; large colorful buildings; brick walls; blue sky; or a wall of trees that shows lots of leaves and color but very few trunks.

Don't choose a background that distracts attention away from the vehicle—anything with other cars in it, anything with signage in it, etc.

Avoid background colors that clash with the vehicle's hue.

Avoid backgrounds that feature prominent vertical lines or horizontal lines that cut the vehicle into sections.

Don't let the vehicle extend beyond the background. For example, if it's shot in front of a barn but the rear of the vehicle doesn't have the barn behind it, just an open field, it doesn't look as good as when the barn extends beyond the ends of the car.

Never position the vehicle close to trees or poles or mailboxes, so that they look like they are growing out of it.

Avoid heavily stained blacktop.

Don't shoot the vehicle on grass, as many people, including magazine editors, feel that it looks better on the road or at least on gravel.

Don't shoot the vehicle in front of a chain-link fence. It's generally not considered a pleasing background. Other types of decorative fences may work well, however.

Don't shoot the vehicle in a driveway, as it gives the impression that very little time and effort was invested to take the photo. However, if the house is period correct to the vintage car being photographed, it can work well as a background.



At 16mm (25mm considering the lens crop factor), for this photo, though shot from eye height like the first one, the camera position has to be much closer to the car to keep it roughly the same size in the frame. With the much wider angle the car is more distorted. It appears to be lunging at you. Compared to the first photo, note how the background has been pushed back and minimized and how the front wheel appears to be larger than the rear in this photo. (Ever wonder why people's noses appear to be larger than normal in selfies? It's because the camera has a wide angle lens and its positioned close to the face. That's why most "portrait" lenses are 90mm or 100mm. The compression of the longer focal length makes for more pleasing (equal) facial features.)

Housekeeping:

Stay away from parking lot lines, sewer grates, painted curbs, guardrails and other distractions.

Remove stray leaves, cigarette butts, pebbles, or other debris on the ground around the vehicle.

General Camera Settings:

If the discussion below is confusing, or if your camera is a simple point-and-shoot that lacks manual features like Aperture Priority and Shutter Priority, skip this section and simply set the camera to Automatic and fire away.

Resolution: Set the camera to the highest resolution.

ISO: Set the camera's ISO to 80 or 100 (200 for most Nikons) and lock it in. (In some programs the ISO adjusts automatically to compensate for dark and light situations. You don't want this.) Higher settings can be used but digital noise will increase.

White Balance: Set it to Auto (AWB) if you are unsure of the lighting, or set it to sunlight or overcast/shade to match the ambient lighting at the location.

Aperture Priority (AV or A): Use this setting when the camera is on a tripod and the objective is a deep depth-of-field. Set the aperture to F16.

Shutter Priority (TV or S): Use this setting to avoid shake when the camera is handheld.

Handheld: Use the reciprocal of the focal length that the lens is set at to determine the minimum speed with which you can handhold without shake. For instance:

Focal length 28mm / shutter speed should be 1/30 of a second or higher

Focal length 50mm / shutter speed should be 1/60 of a second or higher

Focal length 100mm / shutter speed should be 1/125 of a second or higher

And so on.

Shoot at faster speeds than the reciprocal of the focal length if the available light will allow proper exposure, to further reduce the possibility of camera shake.

Flash fill: Use it if you want to, but also take multiple shots without it.

Bracketing: Use exposure compensation to bracket photos to provide 2 or 3 different exposures for each one.



At 11mm (17.6mm with the lens factor) the effect is taken even further and the Judge is even more distorted, but some would say more dynamic. All three photos are interesting, because none are taken at 38mm (60mm with lens factor), which is the approximate angle of view that the eye normally sees.

Exterior Housekeeping:

Make sure the vehicle is clean, no spots, dust, or wax in the crevices.

Check the grilles for dirt, dust, and/or bugs.

If you can see through the grilles, make sure it's clean behind them as well.

Make sure the tire sidewalls are clean (including white letters, no yellow or brown staining from protectant).

Make sure that the insides of the wheelwells are clean.

Position the inside rearview mirror so that it faces directly out of the rear window instead of canted toward the driver.

Make sure that the front and rear license plates are perfectly straight and are not damaged.

Make sure that the license plate hardware is acceptable and not rusty. If screws are used, turn them so that they are in the same position on the left and right.

Shoot Procedure:

Don't shoot the vehicle at high noon. Always try to shoot early in the morning or late in the day when the sun is low and the light is softer.

Keep the sun at your back and shoot the lit side of the vehicle. Just be aware of and eliminate any hot spots caused by the sun by changing the camera's position relative to the vehicle.

If the vehicle has center caps on its wheels with a symbol or writing, position it so that the center cap is straight on the front wheel for the front 3/4 shots and rear 3/4 shots, since the front tires will be turned toward the camera in each instance.

Always be aware of distracting reflections in the vehicle's paint, such as other people or cars, buildings, trees, or the camera and tripod, and remove them by changing the position of the car or camera.

Generally, the side windows should be up. However, if there are distracting reflections when the side windows are up, then put them down. Make sure they are all the way down. If there are rear quarter windows, they must then be all the way down as well.



Altering the camera height relative to the car will also change its look in the photo. Here the focal length is the same at 11mm, but the nose, while still aggressive, at least appears to be a bit less elongated when the photo is taken from a lower angle. (If you'd like the full story on this 1971 Judge, it's published in the November 2014 issue of Hemmings Muscle Machines.)

Generally, the focal length of the lens used can be anywhere from 15mm to 135mm (not including a digital camera crop factor) depending upon the effect you are trying to achieve. The 15mm to 28mm focal length will provide a dramatic wide-angle view for front and rear $\frac{3}{4}$ shots that make the vehicle look like it's lunging toward you.

The 35mm to 80mm settings are considered the "normal" range and will provide shots typical of what the eye sees—little drama.

And 90mm to 150mm and higher will provide compression that will make the vehicle look mean, like it's up on haunches and ready to pounce. The longer focal length also reduces depth of field and can better isolate the vehicle by keeping it in focus and

letting the background go blurry (using F8 instead of F16 or F22 at 150mm will further the effect).

Though it's tempting to use 200mm and 300mm focal lengths, more times than not, the resulting photos are too soft (blurry). The lens has to be of very high quality (read expensive) to retain the sharpness we need at those extended focal lengths.

Don't shoot a dead-on side, dead-on front, or dead-on rear overall body shots with a focal length of less than 50mm, as it distorts the body too much.

If you have a tripod, use it for static shots. For overall body shots, use Aperture Priority and set the aperture to F8, F11, or F16.

Back these shots up with a few handheld shots at a shutter speed fast enough to avoid camera shake—1/60, 1/125 or 1/250 of a second.

Don't crop out the ends of the car (i.e. bumpers etc.) in any body shots. Leave ample room around the car.

Focus on the grilles or an emblem that is closest to the camera for front shots and the taillights or an emblem that is closest to the camera for the rear shots.

On front and rear 3/4 shots, do some with the front wheels perfectly straight and then do some more with the front wheels turned, so that you can see the wheel face (not the tire tread), to provide a more aggressive stance.

Dead-on side, dead-on front, and dead-on rear shots should always have the front wheels perfectly straight.

Using a polarizing filter on the exterior shots can remove unwanted reflections from the vehicle and deepen the blue sky.

Don't shoot the vehicle partially shadowed.

Note: this is my explanation of the focal length multiplication factor from the action photo blog, just to refresh your memory.

Since many digital cameras in the non-pro price ranges use APS-C sized sensors, which are smaller than the full-frame sensors (equal in size to the 35mm film cameras) used in pro digital cameras, there is a focal length multiplication factor (aka crop factor) to be considered when choosing focal length. For instance, on the 60D the ratio is 1.6:1. Since its sensor is smaller than full frame, when an 18mm lens is used it actually provides the field of view equal to a 28mm lens on a full-frame sensor digital camera or 35mm film camera.