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Generation X: Jaguar XFR-S meets its ancestors

14 November 2013 | Joe Breeze

The XFR-S is Jaguar's answer to the latest updated super-saloons from its German rivals – but in playing catch-up, has the new car lost sight of its roots? We took it to meet two of its ancestors to find out...

Jaguar hasn't forgotten about its long-serving saloon while stoking the F-type's publicity fire

Although the 1948 Earls Court Motor Show XK120 prototype was merely intended as a pretty showcase for the revolutionary straight-six engine (which Jaguar would use well into the 80s), its simple, svelte curves bought it a production run. Later developments of the design unnecessarily cluttered the overall appearance; a select few might be struck by déjà vu when first setting eyes on the XFR-S.

Green is gone



Dominating its profile is a (mercifully optional) carbonfibre rear wing, part of a styling package which differentiates it from the less focused XFR. In rediscovering its youth, the über-XF strays worryingly close to ‘boy racer born again’ territory – however, the 68% reduction in lift that the package provides easily serves as justification. Slightly less excusable is the fact that though ‘Italian Racing Red’ and ‘French Racing Blue’ can be found in the XFR-S’s five-segment colour wheel, there’s no room for the traditional hue of its homeland. Sure, the sombre shade might not always suit the more stylistically extrovert machines, but it sure seemed to work on the XJ220.

Today, accessing the 550HP club (or 542bhp) in a Jaguar requires £80,000 and a trip to your local dealership, rather than the £450,000-odd, cylinders-missing kerfuffle that was Project XJ220. And while it might not share the competition pedigree of its forefather, the R-S counters with outstanding everyday usability. The steering is light at low speeds yet sufficiently meaty, and the ride is astonishing for a car which boasts a focused nature. The eight-speed gearbox seems to have predicted your next move before you have – in fact, it actually has, using clever technology to identify overtaking sprees and corner exits, and holding back upchanges to assist. Though you’ll most likely have switched to the paddle-shift manual mode in anticipation of exercising those 542 horses, it’s reassuring to know that man and machine are both on the same page.

Animal instincts



Despite its obedience when docile, the familiar supercharged 5.0-litre V8 delivers right-foot-flat performance that can only be described as animalistic – and the electronic gamekeepers intervene only when absolutely necessary. Both the 40s and 90s cars included their top speeds in their name; there's no '186' to be found here, but the ease with which you find yourself unintentionally equalling the elder relative's v_{max} is alarming. And while the gorgeous but seemingly muted growl from the exhaust was drowned out by the rhythmic hammering of the 220's straight-six while both were idling on our photoshoot, the R-S retorts with arguably the best stereo system you'll ever come across in a standard-spec production car.

It's good to see Jaguar hasn't forgotten about its long-serving saloon while stoking the F-type's publicity fire, giving it the potency to be considered a viable alternative to the German 'bahnstomers'. Yes, it might be comparable to a British bulldog which, in chasing a pack of German Shepherds, has forgotten its way home. But as with the pair of historic props we've brought along, the XFR-S has been born into a crucial period for Jaguar. It might take the brand's youthful rediscovery a touch too far, but it's backed up by some truly grown-up engineering. If only Papa Smurf would remove his hang-glider from the bootlid.



Photos: Joe Breeze/Alex Penfold

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