

Today's Auto Repair

with Chip Stewart

- Doing it yourself -

Today's cars are extremely sophisticated; their operational parameters are much narrower than they used to be. There is no room for poor quality parts or workmanship. So, a word to the wise for Do-It-Yourselfers; *don't*. However, Do-It-Yourselfers are an adventurous, hardy bunch (with, it would seem, a lot of money to waste) so let's examine some of the problems they can run into.

First of all, engine/transmission management systems in today's cars can't be properly diagnosed without some very expensive test equipment. Even with the proper equipment, the information obtained is general and, at times, may even be misleading. For example, a poorly grounded wire can simulate a multitude of problems, leading the inexperienced to purchase and replace many unnecessary and expensive parts. On the other hand, many "engine miss" problems are caused simply by bad spark plugs or plug wires. A DIY'er can be successful in changing these. Just use the proper tools, torque spark plugs correctly, and do one at a time.

DIY'S'ers like to "repair" brakes and they usually try to do them as cheap as possible. The difference between a barely adequate brake job and a good one may be just a few feet on a stop. That's just enough distance to launch your engine into your lap or go right through some pedestrian. No brake job bill has ever been higher than a hospital bill. Get a professional to do the work.

Do-It-Yourselfers may be more successful at smaller jobs like water pumps, starters or alternators. Replacement parts should be purchased at a high quality parts store or, if money is a concern, good used parts from a reputable auto recycler may be preferred. Be wary of lifetime warrantied parts from "fast food" type auto parts chains. The warranties are good but the quality usually isn't. (That's why the parts are cheap.) The warranty doesn't cover labor and the cheaply rebuilt part may fail prematurely, perhaps several times. It's a numbers game - you take your chances.

Preventative maintenance is a DIY'S'ers best bet. Oil changes and lube jobs aren't too complicated but they should be done thoroughly. Dispose of used oil and filters properly. Lube not only front end parts but anything that moves - hood and door hinges, lock tumblers, tailgates, drive lines, etc. Check transmission and differential lube levels on a regular basis. Keep your tires aired and your air filter clean. Tighten up whatever is loose and rattling. Pay attention to your owner's manual. Keep your car clean and keep good service records. A clean, well-maintained vehicle will drive better, longer and retain its resale value. And when you do need some professional help remember to shop for high quality instead of low price. "The bitterness of poor quality remains long after the sweetness of low price is forgotten."

