

## ROAD TEST CHEVROLET MALIBU MAXX SS

# Traveling salesmen get a dream car.

BY AARON ROBINSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEVIN WING

This Malibu Maxx SS painted in Laser Blue Metallic is about the same color as the bolt of lightning that killed my pal Jeff's 1974 Cadillac. Actually, it wasn't lightning so much as an electrical arc. Maybe it was an electrical arc; we don't know for sure. The old Caddy just stopped running one day while we had a screwdriver stuck down its distributor.

Who's Jeff? He is a GM man, one of the few from Generation X. He lives in the Long Island suburb of Plainview—we're not making the name up—with his wife and new baby, his antique Cadillac, an Oldsmobile Alero, and a Chevy Malibu company car. He drives about 50,000 miles a year and goes for a spacious vehicle that doesn't cost much and gets decent fuel

economy. The Malibu Maxx SS makes him hot. "As a company rep, I *aspire* to that car."

Chevy has been putting traveling salesmen in a sweat for 45 years by gluing the Super Sport badge to workaday sedans. The Malibu Maxx, Chevrolet's slightly funky, somewhat frumpy bobtail wagon was burning for the SS treatment from day one, which for the Maxx came in 2003.

True, the Maxx is already a Gauloises-smoking bohemian at the Chevrolet of baseball, hot dogs, and apple-pie fame. It rolls on GM's front-drive Epsilon platform, which it shares with European cosmopolitans from Saab and Opel. To American eyes, the body is a somewhat runty-looking cross between a family sedan and an ice chest, but it speaks to the

Continental preference for hatchbacks. The chassis is also stiff and relatively sophisticated. Check out those cast-aluminum arms in the multilink rear suspension. Were autobahns consulted in the making of the Maxx?

With a thick spear of chrome splitting its face, the old Maxx looked as if it were wearing orthodontic headgear. For 2006 the Maxx gets a more straightforward array of grilles, and the SS receives extra silver accent rings. It's a simple change that, like having braces removed, works wonders for the smile. The SS also receives a spoiler on the hatch, some rocker cladding below the doors, and a square-jawed front bumper with a chin spoiler and fog lights. Inside the 225/50

Goodyear Eagle LS-2 tires are 18-inch alloy wheels with five very thick, very square spokes that look ready for the big torque.

The SS badge is really about the engine, and at the \$24,690 base price (ours had only a \$325 satellite-radio receiver increasing its sticker), the Maxx SS gets more of it. This is still a 60-degree iron-block pushrod V-6—and you were expecting... what?—but the bores grow by three millimeters and total displacement rises from 3.5 liters to 3.9. A variable-length intake plenum optimizes airflow, and a new variable-valve-timing system rotates the cam to crack open the intake valves (and yes, the exhaust valves, too) earlier or later depending on the motion of your right foot. That's a first for "cam in block" engines, says GM.

Snigger if you wish. Say that's like being first out with a black-and-white plasma-screen TV, but pushrod cam phasing is a new wrinkle worth noting and a widget that even the Corvette doesn't have.

Ultimately, easier breathing is what the fuss is about, and the 3.9 revs hard and fast with an unusually crisp song that we're unaccustomed to in GM's pushrod V-6s. It also doesn't gasp at the far end of the tach, winding to the 6200-rpm redline with a steady, consistent push. We'd be hooting even louder if this 3.9 were making, say, the same 250 horsepower and 242 pound-feet as the overhead-cam 3.5-liter V-6 in the Saturn Vue Red Line. That engine, by the way, is made by Honda, which knows a thing about squeezing out horsepower. Output from the Maxx SS is 240 horses at 5800 rpm and 240 pound-feet of torque at 2800 rpm, which is still an upgrade of 39 horsepower and 19 pound-feet over the 3.5-liter V-6 in the Maxx LT and LTZ.

Chevy gives the engine just four speeds to work with and an up-and-down button on the shifter if you want to change your own gears. After toggling into and out of overdrive a few times, the novelty wears off. The automatic's computer doesn't hate to downshift, so you rarely feel the need to take over. When you do, the button quickly becomes second nature to your fingers.

It's not an American car if it can't lay rubber. The Maxx sure does—a good 20 feet of it if you disable the traction control. Neighbor's party kept you up last night? Blast 'em out of bed at 7 a.m. with a burnout that will set off fire alarms. More judicious control gets the Maxx through a quarter-mile of asphalt in 15.3 seconds at 91 mph, having whisked past 60 mph in 6.9 seconds. The speed governor checks in at 115 mph. In a race to 60 mph, you'll clip a base Maxx by 0.9 second, which seems a small difference to a clock but is a substantial one to your keister. The fatter tires contribute to better stopping from 70 mph—177 feet versus 191 for the base





Maxx, which has the exact same brake discs—and more athletic cornering. The Maxx SS pulls a stable 0.83 g on the skidpad; the base Maxx chews its tires at 0.78 g.

Chewing the front tires was a behavior we noted often in the base Maxx. The SS corners with far less understeer at speed, whether through extra rubber or better tuning of the suspension or both. We thought the electric motor providing the power assist was supplying unusually good feedback until we realized there's no motor. In the Maxx SS, GM replaces the electric-power-steering servo with a hydraulic one, and the SS tracks a turn flatly and impressively faithfully to the path you aim it along. Granted, it does try to aim itself under hard acceleration, tugging at the rim with torque steer, but the change in steering hardware is definitely applause material.

What body motion there is during quick driving gets restrained by the suspension

to small, controlled movements. Even Chevy is joining the handling religion. Handling and ride? There's still some learning to do. For such a modern suspension, the Maxx SS's supplies a leaden ride in the style of Big Three performance packages of yore. Over bumps the floor shivers with impact clunks and resonant vibrations. There's always an acute sense of the metal in motion down below. We've seen much worse out of Detroit before. The Maxx's body feels tight and remained rattle-free, and the bump harshness is fairly tolerable.

You can have any interior color in the SS as long as it's black (your exterior paint choices are silver, black, white, and Caddy-killer blue). Except for some silver-painted plastic and chrome glints here and there, the Malibu is as dark inside as a film bag. The supportive front seats are dressed in a black vinyl-and-cloth mix accented by a cross-hatch pattern that looks like it belongs in a mid-'70s Porsche. A three-

spoke steering wheel with a strange but inoffensive squared-off rim adds to the sport atmosphere. Adjustable pedals are standard.

The back seat is the star, as if the designers started with a living-room love seat and put a car around it. It is spacious, with 41 inches of legroom and a bottom cushion that slides back and forth to expand the baggage capacity as needed. The rear seatback tilts to three positions, and the daylight pours in through two skylights, which have retractable shades. Fold the Maxx's seats flat to open the already generous cargo hold from 23 cubic feet to 41.

## COUNTERPOINT

### DAVE VANDERWERP

I was pleasantly surprised by the Malibu Maxx SS—it's probably GM's best mainstream car. An additional 39 horsepower from the 3.9-liter SS engine helps, and this V-6 is much better paired with an automatic, shown by a recent negative experience with a manual G6 GTP (see page 52). The body add-ons are tasteful, and the hydraulic steering seems to be a lot better weighted than the electric setup of earlier Malibus. Two complaints: I found the manumatic shift on the shift lever awkward to use, and the radio is overly button intensive by about a factor of two. GM's new iPod-ready "black tie" radio in the Solstice and Vue is a vast improvement.

### TONY QUIROGA

I knew the Malibu Maxx SS would have serious sporting pretensions because of all those Xs and Ss at the end of its name. What I didn't expect was the improved driving experience of the SS. Engine noise from the 3.9-liter was muted, the chassis balanced ride and handling well considering its 18-inch wheels, and the steering had a noticeable increase in weight and accuracy over the base car's. Still, the Maxx SS costs about as much as a base Audi A3 2.0T, and although the Maxx offers more interior room, the A3 is the better car in every other way, which is why the Audi made the 2006 10Best list and the Maxx SS did not.

### TONY SWAN

The guy who came up with this car's exterior probably did his initial sketch after reading a biography of Hans Ledwinka late at night while eating a pizza, and then waking up with heartburn at about 2 a.m. Or maybe his mom was frightened by a Tatra just before giving birth. Hey, artistic inspiration has many sources. On the other hand, this car's tightened sinews and bigger engine give it something the other Maxxes lack: a driver gratification factor that registers on the C/D fun-to-drive meter. Beyond that, the, uh, unique shape does yield wagon-like cargo benefits. And remember, you can't see the styling from the driver's seat.

## THE VERDICT

**Highs:** Can perform 20-foot burnouts, better-looking since the nose job, spacious back seat and trunk.

**Lows:** Rubbermaid interior bits, torque steer, a hollow ride.

**The Verdict:** Chevy's odd but handy Euro-wagon gets more Yankee brawn.



## CHEVROLET MALIBU MAXX SS

**Vehicle type:** front-engine, front-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 5-door wagon

**Price as tested:** \$25,015

**Price and option breakdown:** base Chevrolet Malibu Maxx SS (includes \$625 freight), \$24,690; XM satellite radio, \$325

**Major standard accessories:** power windows, driver seat, and locks; remote locking; A/C; cruise control; tilting and telescoping steering wheel; rear defroster and wiper

**Sound system:** Chevrolet AM-FM-satellite radio/CD player, 6 speakers

### ENGINE

Type ..... V-6, iron block and aluminum heads  
Bore x stroke ..... 3.90 x 3.31 in, 99.0 x 84.0mm  
Displacement ..... 237 cu in, 3800cc  
Compression ratio ..... 9.8:1  
Fuel-delivery system ..... port injection  
Valve gear ..... pushrods, 2 valves per cylinder, hydraulic lifters, variable intake- and exhaust-valve timing  
Power (SAE net) ..... 240 bhp @ 5800 rpm  
Torque (SAE net) ..... 240 lb-ft @ 2800 rpm  
Redline ..... 6200 rpm

### DRIVETRAIN

Transmission ..... 4-speed automatic with manumatic shifting  
Final-drive ratio ..... 3.69:1  
Gear Ratio Mph/1000 rpm Max test speed  
I 2.92 72 44 mph (6200 rpm)  
II 1.55 13.5 84 mph (6200 rpm)  
III 1.00 20.9 115 mph (5500 rpm)  
IV 0.70 29.9 115 mph (3800 rpm)

### DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase ..... 112.3 in  
Track, front/rear ..... 60.0/60.2 in  
Length/width/height ..... 187.8/69.8/58.1 in  
Ground clearance ..... 6.1 in  
Drag area, Cd (0.37) x frontal area (24.1 sq ft) ..... 8.9 sq ft  
Curb weight ..... 3620 lb  
Weight distribution, F/R ..... 60.2/39.8%  
Curb weight per horsepower ..... 15.1 lb  
Fuel capacity ..... 16.3 gal

### CHASSIS/BODY

Type ..... unit construction with a rubber-isolated powertrain cradle  
Body material ..... welded steel stampings

### INTERIOR

SAE volume, front seat ..... 54 cu ft  
rear seat ..... 52 cu ft  
cargo, seats up/down ..... 23/41 cu ft  
Practical cargo room, length of pipe ..... 129.0 in  
largest sheet of plywood, l x w ..... 73.0 x 37.5 in  
no. of 10 x 10 x 16-in boxes, seats up/down ..... 12/31  
Front-seat adjustments ..... fore-and-aft, seatback angle; driver only: front height, rear height, lumbar support  
Restraint systems, front ..... manual 3-point belts; driver and passenger front, side, and curtain airbags  
rear ..... manual 3-point belts, curtain airbags

### SUSPENSION

Front ..... ind, strut located by a control arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar  
Rear ..... ind; 1 trailing arm, 2 lateral links, and 1 toe-control link per side; coil springs; anti-roll bar

### STEERING

Type ..... rack-and-pinion with variable hydraulic power assist  
Steering ratio ..... 16.2:1  
Turns lock-to-lock ..... 2.8  
Turning circle curb-to-curb ..... 41.3 ft

### BRAKES

Type ..... hydraulic with vacuum power assist and anti-lock control  
Front ..... 11.7 x 1.0-in vented disc  
Rear ..... 10.6 x 0.6-in disc

### WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size/type ..... 17 x 18 in/cast aluminum  
Tires ..... Goodyear Eagle LS-2, P225/50R-18 94T M+S  
Test inflation pressures, F/R ..... 30/30 psi  
Spare ..... high-pressure compact on steel wheel

If there's a betrayal, it's the SS's cheap trimmings. Ragged mold partlines are everywhere. Several plastic trim pieces feel as if they were secured by bubblegum and a prayer. There's this sense that if you turned the car over and shook it vigorously the entire interior might fall out. There are no overhead hand grips for front-seat occupants, and the trim around the skylights appears to have been cut out with dull scissors. If GM didn't build cars as if it expected to discount them, maybe it wouldn't have to.

Speaking of price, this SS's \$25,015 as-tested sticker (less whatever spiffs are offered this week) comes in a shade below the \$25,380 of the Maxx LTZ, which has leather seats and a few other refinements but not the maximum-bore V-6. We could drone on about idle quality and interior materials, both of which are better in a Honda or Toyota. We might mention that the more agile Mazda 6 wagon costs about

the same and offers a stick. Our man Jeff doesn't care. You'd have had more luck telling Bella Abzug that they're running a special on corsets. Jeff is a GM man. ■

### CURRENT BASE PRICE\* dollars x 1000

Saturn Vue V-6 AWD (3.5-liter, 250 hp, 5-sp auto)	28
Chevrolet Malibu Maxx SS (3.9-liter, 240 hp, 4-sp auto)	25
Mazda 6s Sport wagon (3.0-liter, 220 hp, 5-sp man)	24
Subaru Forester 2.5XT (2.5-liter, 230 hp, 5-sp man)	23

\*Base price includes freight, any performance options, and applicable gas-guzzler tax.

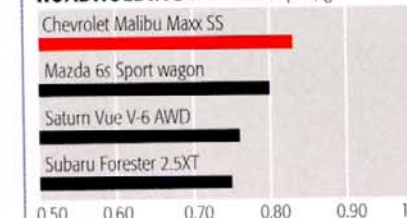
### ACCELERATION seconds ■ 0-60 mph ■ 1/4-mile



### BRAKING 70-0 mph, feet



### ROADHOLDING 300-foot skidpad, g



### EPA CITY FUEL ECONOMY mpg



## C/D TEST RESULTS

ACCELERATION	Seconds
Zero to 30 mph	2.4
40 mph	3.5
50 mph	5.1
60 mph	6.9
70 mph	8.9
80 mph	11.2
90 mph	14.9
100 mph	19.2
110 mph	24.4
Street start, 5-60 mph	6.9
Top-gear acceleration, 30-50 mph	2.9
50-70 mph	3.9
Standing 1/4-mile	15.3 sec @ 91 mph
Top speed (governor limited)	115 mph

### BRAKING

70-0 mph @ impending lockup ..... 177 ft

### HANDLING

Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad ..... 0.83 g  
Understeer ..... minimal

### FUEL ECONOMY

EPA city driving ..... 18 mpg  
EPA highway driving ..... 26 mpg  
C/D-observed ..... 18 mpg

### INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL

Idle ..... 49 dBA  
Full-throttle acceleration ..... 74 dBA  
70-mph cruising ..... 66 dBA