THE THREE OLD LADIES ARE RIDING ON A BUS. The first says to her friends, “It sure is windy.”

The second says, “It’s not Wednesday, it’s Thursday.”

The third yells, “I’m thirsty too. Let’s get a drink!”

This is pretty much the conversation that I’m having with “Big Daddy” Don Garlits, the man considered to be the greatest drag racer ever to wrap his legs around a 7000-horsepower engine and ride it down the strip like a pony. We’re standing in the middle of his museum in Ocala, Fla., surrounded by dozens of his signature black Swamp Rat dragsters.

These machines hurtled him through milestones of speed—Garlits was the first to surpass 170, 200 and 270 mph—but besting barriers took more power, which created more noise, which robbed Big Daddy of some of his ability to hear.

“I need you to speak up,” the 78-year-old shouts, turning his head to face me with his “good ear,” which isn’t really. “Sorry, son, the Swamp Rats have gnawed off a bit of my eardrums over the years.”

“Well, that’s what I want to talk about,” I say, instinctively tilting my head to favor my left ear. After nearly 20 years of chasing race car drivers for a living, I too have been gnawed on a bit. The top-end hearing in my right ear is shot.

“What about what?”

“What about how loud drag racing is.”

“Oh man, I’m real proud of drag racing.”

“No sir, not proud. Loud.”

“Yeah, it’s loud as hell. People don’t know what to expect the first time. It’s a trip.”

I shift a little. “On the strip?”

“No, it’s a trip.”

WHEN THE MAG FIRST raised the possibility of a Loud issue, I immediately offered drag racing as the loudest sport on the planet. Nothing less close, to be honest. But within minutes, e-mails and phone calls from doubting editors trickled in. What about Cameron Indoor Stadium in the middle of a Duke-North Carolina game? What about Neyland, Bryant-Denny or Autzen stadiums in the fall? Or the vuvuzela horns during the World Cup in Johannesburg? I fielded these queries and volleyed a few of my own: Have any of those ever been so loud they made you cry? Or split your eardrum like a TYLENOL Safety Seal?

Yet the NHRA has never conducted a formal study to measure the sport’s most startling by-product: noise level.

And that’s no accident. Requests have been politely turned down because the lack of hard numbers adds to the mystery that surrounds the sport’s biggest drawing card. “If I can get you to the drag strip and get you to watch one run, then I have made a fan for life,” says Don “The Snake” Prudhomme, winner of 49 NHRA races across Top Fuel and its full-bodied nitro cousin, Funny Cars. “Loud isn’t a strong enough word. It’s so overwhelming your brain can hardly compute what it’s hearing and seeing. It’s damn near a religious experience.”

“Your bones literally rattle,” echoes NASCAR driver Kurt Busch, who raced in one of NHRA’s lower-level divisions earlier this year, “and the drag racers get a sick pleasure in taking rookies to the starting line and putting us between the two nitro cars. If you aren’t ready, it hurts. It feels like someone is sticking a Taser into your ear canal.”

I pulled that cruel but exhilarating trick on my wife back in mid-September. It was the opening hot rod veterans cover their ears, while the uninitiated recoil into instinctual poses of survival. An NHRA media relations person says they once let ESPN bring some seismologists out to the starting line. Two Top Fuel dragsters off the line registered a 23 on the Richter scale.

A Top Fuel dragster is built on a foundation of earthshaking numbers. One of its eight cylinders creates as much horsepower as an entire NASCAR Sprint Cup car; its fuel pump delivers 500 pounds of line pressure; its 17-inch-tall rear tires create g-force loads equal to those of a space shuttle launch; and the rear wing manufactures 8,000 pounds of downforce, enough to run the car upside down in a tunnel, assuming you could get it up there.
night of the Carolina Nationals at zMAX Dragway, which sits adjacent to the Charlotte Motor Speedway. Even a 12-year marriage to a motorsports writer, during which she has been dragged from fairground infield to the Daytona 500, had not prepared her for the NHRA. Hammered by the shock wave, she turned to me with tear-filled eyes and clutched her chest. Okay, I thought, I have to get some numbers on this.

The next day, determined to take down some sort of measurement, I purchased a $99 handheld noise meter at the local RadioShack and snuck it out to the starting line. John Force’s Funny Car rolled up to the line and idled beside me. The meter read 115 decibels. Force punched it, blasting away from me as he hit 291 mph. A 129 dB “popped up, blinking on the display. I scrambled for the instruction manual, which explained a blinking number indicates that the noise exceeds the meter’s maximum.

I returned to RadioShack, where a salesman named Howie scratched his head: “That’s the

the 127 dBs recorded for the sea of vuvuzela horns at this past summer’s World Cup. On paper, my NHRA measurement didn’t seem much louder. But decibels are recorded on a logarithmic scale, which means that increases are not one-to-one in terms of intensity. Each three-decibel increment represents a 100% change in sound pressure. In other words, assuming Top Fuel dragsters landed somewhere in the 150-dB range, they are over 100 times louder than the Cameron Crazies.

EVEN A MILE AWAY, in a suburban cul-de-sac near zMAX, decibels reach into the 90s when the NHRA is town. “By the time it reaches us, it’s pretty dumb down,” says Charles Connor, a new resident with a clear view of the Dragway from his backyard. “Honestly, the cicadas and frogs are more annoying. But when we first moved here my wife was like; ‘Did a plane just crash in the woods? I can’t imagine how loud it is being in the middle of it.”

WALL OF SOUND

ON THE NOISE SPECTRUM, DRAG RACING SITS BETWEEN PAIN THRESHOLD AND EARDRUM OBLITERATION.

![Diagram of noise spectrum](image)

The strongest model I carry, bro. But my buddy who installs custom car sound systems might have something stronger. Let me call him.”

Two hours later I was back at zMAX in time for some Top Fuel runs, this time with a $2,000 professional sound meter that went to 140 dBs. Antron Brown rolled by. I waved the meter at him, and he gave me the thumbs up. One minute later he broke off a 315.95 mph run. I looked at my new meter—140 dBs. And it was blinking. “Dude, what the hell are you measuring?” Howie sheepishly asked when I called back again.

Well, it certainly wasn’t Cameron Indoor, where a Duke student pegged the home crowd at around 116 dBs during a game against Wake Forest in 2009. And it wasn’t Oregon’s Autzen Stadium, which was recorded at 127.2 dBs during an ’07 home date with USC (about the same as

I can. Ears still ringing, I took my maxed-out meter to a higher authority. Brian Fligor is the director of diagnostic audiology at Children’s Hospital in Boston and an instructor in otology and laryngology at Harvard. By night, the former rock club guitarist works with music acts on acoustic design and proper balance with their in-ear monitors. “Those numbers are ridiculously high,” Fligor says after I explain how close I was to the NHRA action. “If someone is that close and doesn’t have any kind of protection, they’re going to walk away injured. You did have protection, right?”

Fligor explains the varying degrees of noise the human ear can withstand, dependent on factors ranging from peak sound level to length of exposure to distance from a source to good old genetics. “Keith Richards is a legend in the world of audiology,” he says. Constant prolonged exposure to high levels of noise, like a NASCAR Cup race, is bad. “From a seat 20 feet from the track, a NASCAR race averages 106 decibels over four hours,” Fligor explains. “That person is at risk for acoustic trauma or an immediate loss of hearing. Some of it will return, but likely not all.”

Those numbers are comparable to today’s average rock concert, which Fligor pegs in the 104-dB range. Unlike a concert, though, drag racing action happens a few seconds at a time, with lengthy pauses to clear the track after engine failures and oil downs. “But when you are reaching the kind of levels they are,” Fligor says, “length of time is kind of irrelevant. The 145-165 range is when you cross over into physical damage. Get above 165 and you’re talking about total structural destruction of the eardrum.”

For fans, the good news is that ear protection, even over-the-counter foam earplugs, can cut sound by 20 dBs or more when used properly. But for Big Daddy and guys like me, there’s little

I hear that.