

MECHANIX ILLUSTRATED

THE HOW TO MAGAZINE

**NEW CAR ISSUE
1955 CARS**

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'55 CHEVROLET BEL AIR CONVERTIBLE

'55 PLYMOUTH BELVEDERE SPORT COUPE



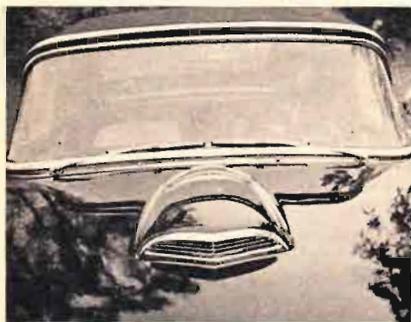
'55 FORD FAIRLANE CROWN VICTORIA

INVENT A NEW TOY AND STRIKE IT RICH

McCAHILL TESTS



This is a factory 'Bird Tom is driving at Ford's fabulous proving ground in Dearborn.



Unlike the ornamental "air scoop" on some cars, the Thunderbird's lets air come in.

Sleek taillight design is characteristic of the clean, functional lines of this "personal" car.



The Ford

Fantastic acceleration, top speed of better than 125 miles an hour, plus good looks and comfort: a real sports car.

LIKE a \$14 Fourth of July salute going off in the middle of a prayer meeting, Mr. Ford's Thunderbird has descended on the sports car populace.

The Ford Motor Company, with its tongue protruding more than halfway through its cheek, claims that the Thunderbird is not a sports car but a "personal" car. This is like claiming that Jack Dempsey was a boxer, not a fighter. To get around this, I am forced to contradict my own book, *The Modern Sports Car* (plug),

Mechanix Illustrated



This is Tom's own Thunderbird which "with tears in my eyes" he test-drove brand-new.

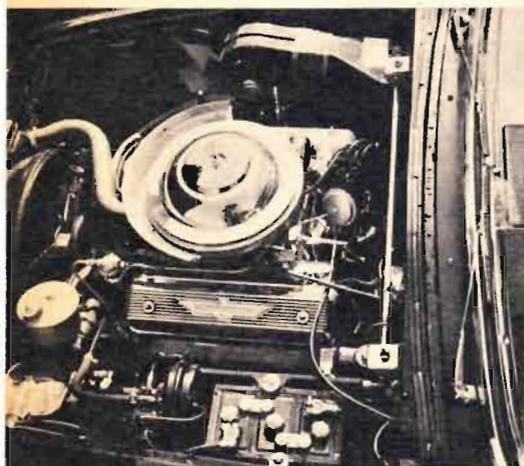
Thunderbird

By Tom McCahill

where I state that a sports car is an automobile designed primarily for competition with some not-too-utilitarian features. On this point Ford louses me up by claiming the Thunderbird was not designed for competition. Probably it wasn't. Nevertheless, it is a full-blown sports car as far as I am concerned.

Undoubtedly, a small group of fuzzy-lipped, hand-on-hip Anglophiles, four times as British as the Queen, will scream at the very mention of the name Thunderbird. They will immediately start spouting formulae, volumetric efficiency and the appallingly high price of pearl gray bowlers. To this hard little knot of True Believers, I would like to send a message. Here it is: Nuts. As Jim McMichael, who tested the car with me, pointed out—the Thunderbird is the car that forced the sports car facts into the open.

I have realized for some time that the main appeal of many sports cars for the hard little knot is the fact that they are *foreign* vehicles, not the fact that they are better ones. Up until now, the imports have been better, as any one who knows automobiles is forced to admit. But now comes the Thunderbird, which will match in performance any imported sports car within \$1,000 of its price range. If the Thunderbird was built in Chu Chin Chow, China, or East Dimple, England, and sported a price tag of \$7,500, it would be considered the buy of the century by the East-of-Iceland-Forever group. I can visualize some of the literary effusions of the devoted pamphleteers: "A brilliant motorcar . . . sensational high-performing drop-head coupe . . . magnificent sports-tourer . . . as the Americans would say, 'A bomb emerges from Coventry which promises to

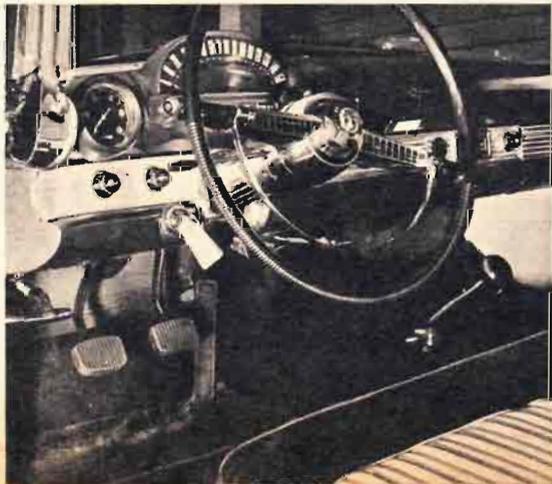


The big, 292-cubic-inch engine (same as Mercury displacement) develops 198 horsepower and gives the Thunderbird performance that is spectacular.

Grille of Ford's "personal" car is very Vignale in appearance and undoubtedly was influenced by the famed Italian car stylist's colorful design.

Well, you can't have everything. In respect to luggage space, the Thunderbird is like its overseas cousins: cramped. Note center gas-fill cap.

Tom's is the first Thunderbird with an overdrive transmission, which explains clutch pedal. The steering wheel can be adjusted 3" back and forth.





Uncle Tom thinks Ford "borrowed" his idea, first shown in MI last January, for a three-way top. Like his, Thunderbird hardtop is left home when not wanted.



MCCAHELL'S 3-IN-1 Dream Car

Car can be used on soft top convertible (both) or a sports cap without any top can be, and on steel top coupe

Have you ever said to yourself, "Boy, if this car only had a you-know-what and a gillbolic, I sure could go for it." Well, here's the car.

I'm sure that many will say some were owed to Tom. They have to be.

EXACTLY five years ago the January 1949 issue of MI brought you my idea of a Dream Car. Since then, a lot of things, including the Korean War, have taken place. New cars such as the V-8 Chrysler, the V-8 Studebaker, the Continental Studebaker, the V-8 Lincoln, the King of England, Crosley and Mexican-made cars, America regained supremacy of the automobile world and Polly Adler became fabulously mixed across the United States. Jaguar was just a young pup of less than six months when the 1948 greatest car was designed, now he's middle-aged and getting gray and I've lost sixteen of the last twenty-two hairs on the top of my head. I still would like to buy my

give the competition a real go at Silverstone."

I have been pointing out in these pages for years that in the long run you just can't beat inches for reliable high performance. A big powerful engine, displacing more cubic inches than a coal barge, will break the back of the typical imported peanut whistle almost every time. Ferrari proved this and so did Mercedes in the old days. Naturally, weight in relation to inches is an extremely important factor. That's why high-performing cars, such as the Osca or the 900-pound competition Porsche, can get along so well on a smaller amount of inches inside the engine. But, on the other hand, when you're after comfort and size, as well as performance, only a big engine will do the job with consistent reliability. The 4.9 Ferrari is a big displacement engine, even by American standards, and with this tied up to a light chassis it becomes a world's champion.

The new Thunderbird, weighing between 3,100 and 3,200 pounds, depending on equipment, is a heavy car by sports car standards. But its big 292 cubic-inch-engine (roughly 4.8 liters), developing 198 horsepower, makes it a phenomenal production sports [Continued on page 196]

SPECIFICATIONS

MODEL TESTED:

1955 Ford Thunderbird (with overdrive)

ENGINE:

V-8 cylinder, Y-block; bore 3.75 inches, stroke 3.30 inches; brake horsepower 193 (198 with Ford-O-Matic); compression ratio 8.1 to 1 (8.5 to 1 with Ford-O-Matic); piston displacement 292 cubic inches

DIMENSIONS:

Wheelbase 102 inches; overall length 175.2 inches; tread 56 inches front, 56 rear; width 70.3 inches; height from top of windshield to ground 48.5 inches; weight 2,980 pounds; minimum ground clearance at side rails 5.5 inches; standard tire size 6.70x15; gas tank 17 gals

PERFORMANCE:

| | Overdrive | Ford-O-Matic |
|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| 0 to 30 mph, | 3.6 seconds | 4.1 seconds |
| 0 to 50 mph, | 7.3 seconds | 8.4 seconds |
| 0 to 60 mph, | 9.6 seconds | 11.2 seconds |
| 0 to 70 mph, | 13.2 seconds | 14.7 seconds |
| 0 to 80 mph, | 16.4 seconds | 17.9 seconds |
| Top speed, | about 130 mph | |

The Ford Thunderbird

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car, though no match by any means for a Ferrari or a similar rig. It will, however, give any sports car in the world, selling for less than \$4,000 on these shores, a hell of a run for its money. With the slower Ford-O-Matic transmission it will average 11.2 from zero to 60, with a top speed of 115 mph. With an overdrive transmission it averages, on a corrected speedometer, 9.6 seconds up to 60, with a top estimated to be in the neighborhood of 130 mph.

This is remarkable because the Thunderbird is a generous two-seater with enough room to squeeze in a third body for a one-mile haul to the station. Add to this all the comfort features found in our most deluxe balloons, plus the reliability of the 1955 Mercury power plant (which is used in the Thunderbird), and you have a vehicle that is real something.

I was first attracted to this rig for several reasons but principally because I feel a lot of the design was lifted from plans for my Three-In-One Dream Car published in this magazine (January 1954 MI). For example, this car is available with two tops. The plastic hard top is standard equipment and while it is in place the soft top is stored away, completely out of sight, behind the seat. This arrangement is almost identical to the one I outlined in MI and when Bill Burnett, Ford's Chief Engineer, first showed it to me I said, "This looks awfully familiar. In fact, I think you stole it from me, right down to the way it works." As closely as I can remember, Burnett replied, "I always listen to you, Tom. If you talk too loud, it's not my fault."

Further inspection showed a lot of other little features that looked similar—and a lot of gook that didn't. The instruction book, a real elaborate deal for an American car, also has stuff I believe I fathered. For example, I razed Ford last year about low tire pressure recommendations and stated that they should give two tire pressures: one for Madame Suburbia with the misplaced disc, who only drives to the hashish house, and another pressure for high-speed cruising. Well, the Thunderbird book has just that: one recommended pressure for fast cruising and one for slow-poking.

This new car represents a great achievement and a fantastic departure from former Detroit prissiness. The engineers have done a good job. But in any organization as large as Ford, there are a number of out-and-out gook disciples who continually fight Engineering. The basic Thunderbird product, as it comes off the line, is great. From this point

on the gook boys shoveled with both hands. The Thunderbird has more accessories nailed to it than the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center. If the gook boys weren't checked I expect that by now all Thunderbirds would be delivered with zebra-striped fox tails streaming from each tail light and an oil painting of Henry Ford the First neatly framed inside the hood lid. For example, the first Thunderbird I tested had a minimum of basic equipment but here's what it had extra: Ford-O-Matic transmission, electric windows, electric seat control, radio and heater, automatic window washers, power wipers, power brakes, turn indicators, side mirror, engine dress-up kit (which even includes a chrome fan blade), power steering, whitewall tires, chrome wheel discs and fender panties. As my old friend, Neville Shapiro, might say, "This is a test car?" You may by now suspect that Ford charges extra for all these things and if you do, you're right—which brings up one big beef.

As this goes to press, Ford is advertising the basic Thunderbird at approximately \$2,692 F.O.B., a price as closely related to the actual price as a guppy to a Bengal tiger. The rig I tested, delivered in New York, would cost just a whisker under four grand when you started adding up the cost of the extras that were on it. To start with, to the \$2,692 add more than \$260 Federal tax which comes with every car, of course, regardless of equipment. To this add handling, shipping and conditioning charges and you're already well over \$3,000 for the cheapest possible stripped-down version.

When I got through testing the Thunderbird with Ford-O-Matic I was so impressed with the performance that I ordered one for myself. I wanted it nude, except for an overdrive transmission, which I was anxious to try out. When I got home, I gave my order to Parker Sales and Service in Flemington, N. J., though I had taken advantage of my position in the automobile business to inform the boys in Detroit that I wanted mine *right now*.

About ten days later I received a call from the factory telling me that if I wanted one of the first group of Thunderbirds I would have to take one with more automatic gadgets on it than the Model T had rattles back in 1926. My reply was simple. No. A few hours later I got another telephone call suggesting that my Father didn't know my Mother very well but offering a compromise, under protest. I was to get the first overdrive trans-

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The Ford Thunderbird

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mission ever put in one of these rigs, no power windows and no fender pants. I had to take all the rest (with the exception of the radio, which I didn't get), including power steering. The car, as I received it, has a retail price of \$3,691.50 so I had already cut the price almost two hundred bucks by refusing accessories I didn't want.

Now, Messrs. Breech and Crusoe, here's my beef about that \$2,600-plus price. After a guy lays out \$3,700 or more for a car, you louse up his pride of ownership when some jerk says to him, "Not a bad little car for \$2,600." I'm not disputing the final price in any way—but when a man pays \$3,700 he has a right to be damned mad when the newspapers carry the statement that it's a \$2,600 vehicle. In my book this is real stupid merchandising and if I were Henry, I'd yank both of you on the carpet for an explanation.

My initial tests, as I've already stated, were made with a loaded cream-puff around the Ford track and over the Ford road race course. This car corners as flat as a pool table. I had to go into a full 90-degree, head-snapping bend on dry concrete to get it to tip at all—and this was at speeds of 60 and better. In spite of its fine roadability and true 50-50 balance, the car is softly sprung and rides, I hate to admit, even better than my Lincoln. With true balance such as this car has, extreme stiffness is not always necessary. Mercedes has proved this very well for years.

The real test, with the real Thunderbird sports car with overdrive transmission, started when I took delivery of my own car in Detroit. Just for posterity, my Thunderbird was the first one sold and delivered. (If this isn't true, let me know and I'll sue the Ford Motor Company—that's what they told me.) Starting out for home at 5 a.m. I found cruising the car at 70 on the speedometer (actual 62-63) only indicated 2100 rpm on the excellent tachometer. With my Lincoln bringing up the rear, we kept speeds moderate until we reached the Penn Turnpike, where I pulled into the first filling station, dumped the oil, rear axle and transmission grease, refilled and started out again. Though this car was stiff, it averaged 20 miles to a gallon all the way home and I expect in the future this will improve. So far, the only thing that has gone wrong with the car is the glove compartment latch.

With far fewer miles than I like to admit, and with tears in my eyes, I finally took it out for some performance tests. It was real murder on a new car but this deadline was on me and I had to do it. Zero to 30 averaged

3.6 seconds (this is all on a corrected speedometer). Zero to 50 averaged 7.3 seconds. Zero to 60 averaged 9.6, with one run of 9.5 (this is approximately 67 mph on the speedometer). Zero to 70 averaged 13.2 seconds and zero to 80 took 16.4. In spite of the power steering (which incidentally, is the best I've ever handled) and all the gook, this is big-league sports car performance. In a sports car race, where price was the class factor, nothing at this writing could touch the Thunderbird. In a displacement class race against such cars as the Ferrari, the Thunderbird would be murdered. However, no sports car in the world, with the exception of the Cadillac-Allard, can embarrass you at the traffic light Grand Prix until you add thousands of dollars to the price.

As to top speed, by the time you read this practically every hot rod shop in the country will be featuring additional gimmicks for getting more speed and power out of the Thunderbird. My estimated speed is just a guess, as I have no place to prove it out before this hits the press, but I can't see how the Thunderbird can miss 130 by very much if the heavy gook is kept to a minimum.

The Thunderbird is a comfortable, roomy, two-seater bomb, perfect for a coast-to-coast run or a fast dash to Florida. It has quite ample luggage space for a short trip and should prove as reliable as McCarthy's low opinion of Senator Flanders. I believe it's one of the finest looking cars on the road today, whether you're using the soft or hard-top, and it's especially good looking if you throw the fender pants away. How the engineers managed to keep the gook boys from putting a full-sized bust of Luther Burbank on the hood for a radiator ornament, I'll never know, but they did. The front end is true Italian school or, to be more explicit, Vignale. The dual exhausts come out the Buick-like bumper guards in the rear. The brakes, power plant and a few other things are pure Mercury. The power brakes, which I had to have, are murder. If you panicked with these at 100 mph and shot them to the floor full force, you'd stand an excellent chance of becoming the next Halley's comet.

In summing up, I think the Thunderbird is a great achievement. It is the finest production American sports car ever built, bar none (Cunninghams were never production). At this writing I also have an order in for a hot German import which I may or may not take after owning the Thunderbird. If the kraut crate can do anything that the Thunderbird can't, then I don't know what it is. •