

DRIVER'S REPORT- THE 1956 THUNDERBIRD

BY KEN FERMOYLE

How does the new T-Bird go? It's hotter, naturally—and there are other changes upon which opinion is divided

IT'S BEEN a lot of years since an automobile caught the public fancy as quickly and completely as the Ford Thunderbird. Will the 1956 version be able to keep the trend going?

The new T-Bird is basically unchanged from the original 1955 model. Of the changes that were made, some are for the better—others might better have been skipped.

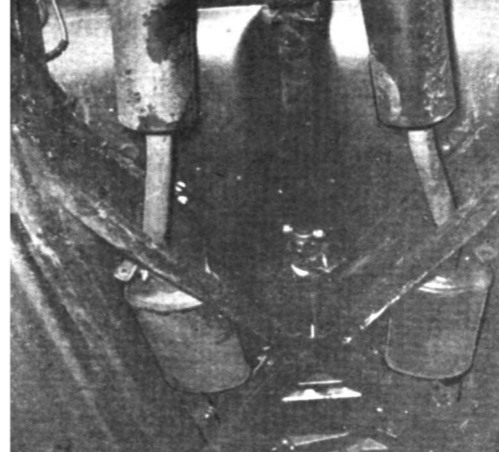
One of the things that caused the '55 to go was the way the car went! It was a hot car and the new one is even more so. Horsepower is up across the board and it shows up in performance.

Two Thunderbirds were used for this report both Ford-o-Matic jobs with the 312-cubic-inch V-8 rated at 225 hp. They averaged nine seconds flat in a number of 0 to 60 mph runs, with several being timed a couple of tenths of a second faster.

(Neither of the T-Birds tested, incidentally, had been given any special tuning and were comparable to one an average customer might get off the showroom floor.)

Times for 0 to 30 mph checks averaged out to just about 3.5 seconds and the 'Birds got from 50 to 80 mph in 10 seconds. Unfortunately, traffic and weather conditions prevented adequate top speed checks. It was a rare 'Bird that couldn't turn between 115 and 120 mph in 1955; automatic shift models generally averaged about 118 and the overdrive jobs were good for 120 or a shade better. It's reasonable to expect the 1956 models to do a bit faster than this.

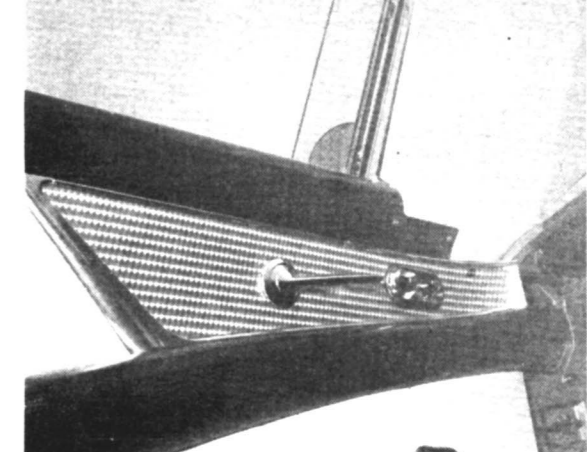
It may be that the 1956 won't top last year's model in the top speed department, however, due to one of the more important changes made in the car. Offsetting the increased power is that conti-



Early 1956 'Birds had only two mufflers, causing resonance inside car. Switch to quad muffler system solved problem.



Fewer right angle bends in tail pipe cut back pressure as compared to '55 system. Exhaust is partially deflected by bumper.



Power seat, window controls are set in left front door panel where they are easily accessible. The side vents are new.

mental tire mounted at the rear. Such a set-up adds a lot of drag at the high end of the speed range and can easily cut several miles off top speed.

The continental mounting is one of the most controversial features added to the 1956 T-Bird. It was added to get the spare out of the luggage compartment and increase carrying capacity. Ford reports that inadequate luggage space was one of the features the car was criticized for in 1955. Removing the tire adds some 20 per cent to the usable area in the trunk.

Personally I feel it might have been better to make the continental kit an option. It not only creates more wind resistance but I think it detracts from the car's appearance. Quite a few people have agreed with me so far.

Having the spare mounted at the extreme rear of the car does seem to result in a bit better weight distribution, however. The ratio in 1955 was about 52 per cent front, 48 per cent rear. Although I wasn't able to check it on scales, the outside spare may help bring this closer to 50-50. My impression was that traction is slightly improved.

Other than that, handling of the '56 is not much different from the '55. A few minor changes were made to the suspension—longer rear springs, revalved shocks—to give a flatter ride. This has resulted in a slight improvement in the new T-Bird's cornering potential, but the 1955 model was so good in this department that it's difficult to assess the benefit of the changes.

The ride is firm by passenger car standards, outrageously comfortable when compared to most sport cars. The T-Bird sticks to the road well, doesn't bounce badly or take off into space after hitting humps. You feel irregularities in road surfaces more than you would in your family sedan but not enough to shake you up to any degree. In return, you get a degree of control and maneuverability that approaches sport car standards.

Unfortunately, Ford has slowed up the



Continental tire mounting must be swung back out of way to permit access to gas filler pipe on the 1956 T-Bird.



Like predecessors, new T-Bird has an adjustable steering wheel. Turning of a knurled collar locks wheel in position.

steering on the new T-Birds. The ratio has been upped from 20 to 23-to-1 and 4¾ turns are required to go from lock to lock. This is hard to understand, since anyone who feels the steering is too stiff can get power steering. In fact, most 1955 models were sold with this option. At any rate, the slow steering definitely hurts the otherwise excellent high speed maneuvering potential of the car.

A real improvement is the optional fiber-glass top with side portholes. These openings, though not very large, do permit better visibility to the sides and are a boon in traffic and tight quarters. Besides, I think they look good. They seem to fit in well with the T-Bird's jaunty appearance. If you disagree, the top with blind rear quarters which was offered last year is still available.

The 312-inch engine offered with Ford-o-Matic is basically the same as the current Mercury power plant. Compression ratio is 9-to-1 and its 225 horses are delivered at 4600 rpm. An engine of the same size is used in overdrive T-Birds, but it has lower compression ratio, 8.4-to-1, and is rated at 215 horsepower. Torque is 324 foot pounds for the hotter engine, 317 for the latter—peak torque coming in at 2600 rpm for both.

A smaller 292-cubic-inch engine with 8.4-to-1 compression ratio is offered for standard shift T-Birds. This is similar to the one offered on all 1955 models but horsepower has been increased to 202 (from either 193 or 198 last year, depending on transmission). The boost is due mainly to higher valve lift; valve timing hasn't been altered.

Hydraulic valve lifters are not used in any of the three engines. As in all other 1956 Ford products a 12-volt electrical system is used instead of the 6-volt.

Ford calls the T-Bird a "personal car," not a sport car. And it isn't a sport car in the sense that a purist uses the term. It certainly is a lot of fun to drive, however. I'll be very much surprised if the new model doesn't meet with the same success the 1955 did. ●

What a T-Bird owner thinks

AS THE OWNER of a 1956 Thunderbird, equipped with a manual shift transmission, I was eager to drive one of the Ford-O-Matic test report cars to see for myself exactly what differences there were between the two types.

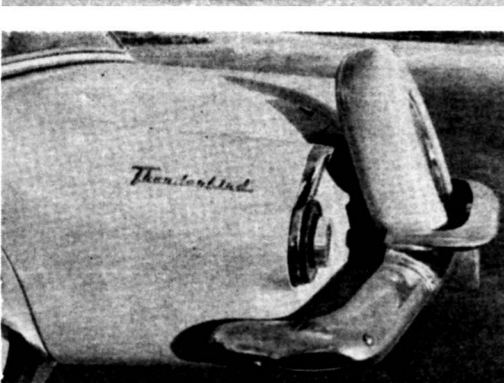
The mechanical differences, other than the transmissions, consist of 312 cubic inches and a 9-to-1 compression ratio, plus a 3.31-to-1 rear axle ratio in the automatic box 'Bird; and 292 inches at 8.4-to-1 and a 3.73-to-1 ring and pinion in the manual shift version.

Driving the 'Bird-O-Matic gave me a completely unrelated feeling to the sensations obtained in my own car. In fact, it was almost like another machine. There was the same exhilarating forward thrust when the throttle was slammed home and the effect was retained throughout the driving range. Most evident, however, was the lack of positive engagement in the torque-converter

when a conscious effort was made to give it the works.

Shifting from low range to drive can be touchy. Lack of friction makes it too easy to bypass drive and go on to neutral. On a proper shift change, however, the rear tires bawl and the torque goes to work with the pinion trying to climb the ring gear and wrap the rear springs around the axle housings. A definitely mushy sensation accompanies this ratio change and a time lag occurs before forward acceleration really begins.

Absence of direct connection, as in the three-speed unit, is the reason for the equalizing extra 23 ponies in the 'matic, and they do the job as far as seat-of-the-pants driving goes. An intense interest is created in those of us who are do-it-yourself shifters as to the performance possibilities of our Thunderbirds should they, too, be equipped with the 225-hp engine.—Lynn Wineland.



Frontal appearance of '56 T-Bird is unchanged from 1955. New are controversial rear-mounted spare, hardtop with port holes in sides.