

## CAR LIFE ROAD TEST

# FORD THUNDERBIRD

**The supreme status symbol of the younger set, Ford's "personal car" has no real competition, because there's no other car with an equally off-beat approach to its design.**

Thunderbird is the choice of the person who wants to be envied. There are other makes and models currently offered that will attract more attention, but even in car-blasé Southern California the general public's reaction to the '61 T-Bird is remarkable. As you thread your way through traffic you are at first unconscious of anything untoward happening—but you soon feel all eyes upon you, not just enviously in all instances, but sometimes downright jealously. If that's what you want from a car, then the new T-Bird is the one for you—but there's more to the car than the public reaction that goes with it.

There's more to the cost of a car than its price and fuel consumption, too. At first examination the Bird may seem an over-priced gas hog, due to its 11 miles per gallon thirst coupled with a list price that's way up there. In states where a 4% sales tax is levied, a Bird convertible equipped similarly to our test car would leave little change from six one thousand dollar bills. Yet the Bird has an actual cost of ownership far less than what its admittedly high price tag would lead you to believe. This is because "cost of ownership" boils down to be the difference between what you *pay* for a car and what you *get* for it when trade-in time rolls around.

Under this definition the Bird appears much more reasonable to own—its resale value is among the highest



of all contemporary American automobiles; in many localities, it commands the highest percentage of its original price of any used car. Locally, six-year-old T-Birds often bring as much as three times the price of a Ford passenger car of the same year. This makes it obvious that the man who wants the snazziest possible transportation at the lowest possible cost could do no better than to buy a year-old Bird every three years. We specify three years as the interval, not because of any estimate of upkeep-versus-depreciation, but because of Ford's policy of a three-year obsolescence cycle on T-Bird styling. Unless some as yet undreamed-of method of cost-cutting evolves, the Bird's unit frame and body construction will continue to prohibit economical styling changes any oftener than that.

With our arguments regarding cost out of the way, let's take a second look at that gas mileage proposition. To begin with, it's rather "penny-wise, pound-foolish" for a man contemplating the purchase of a \$6000 automobile to talk of gas mileage. The oft-quoted remark attributed to J. P. Morgan about the purchase of a yacht finds a parallel here; the anecdote relates that a man inquired of a yacht salesman as to the price of one of the craft on display, and was informed "If you must ask how much it is, you couldn't possibly afford it." The Bird is much the same; if you're worried about the cost of fuel consumption, you're probably in the wrong pew, price-wise.

Actually, fuel consumption is a minor factor for a person affluent enough to think of owning a Thunderbird—the difference between 20 miles per gallon and 11 miles per gallon amounts to about \$150 for 10,000 miles of operation. For the 10,000 miles-per-year-driver, this becomes the annual premium he must pay in operational cost over what a compact would cost him, and in the case of a car costing as much as a new Bird, the figure is less than the depreciation, or for that matter, probably even the insurance on the car.

By now you've undoubtedly made up your mind as to whether or not you'll be able to afford a Thunderbird—but whatever your decision, you'll find our experiences with what we consider America's leading prestige car (at

least among the younger set) to be interesting.

To begin with, the Thunderbird is both a big car and a small car. It is big in bulk in relation to its small (short) wheelbase of just 113 inches—incidentally, this is 1 inch less than the Comet wheelbase, so if you think it unusual for us to refer to the Bird's "bulk," park a Comet alongside one sometime and make a comparison of their apparent sizes.

The Bird is also "big" in weight, as the accompanying data panel shows. It weighs almost as much as the '61 Cadillac, a far larger car, and actually outweighs the senior Chryslers. This large amount of weight and accompanying overhang all draped over a short wheelbase is bound to have a noticeable effect on a car's handling qualities, and the T-Bird is no exception. Although the short wheelbase makes it long on maneuverability in tight quarters for a car of its over-all length, the tremendous percentage of the total that is front and rear overhang causes handling around curves at higher velocities to be somewhat uncertain. Contributing to this vagueness is the soft springing, accompanied by equally wishy-washy shock absorber settings, but this can be alleviated to an amazing extent by the installation of stiffer-than-standard shocks on all four corners of the car. The writer has acquaintances who liked everything about their new Birds except this handling deficiency, and set about to cure it in the above manner. Their efforts were crowned with success, and we heartily recommend that anyone interested in improving the handling of a '61 Thunderbird attack the problem through this avenue before proceeding to more drastic measures.

Steering on the Bird is quick but lacking in feel, due to an overabundance of "help" from the integral power booster. We liked the apparent "caster action" of the steering (it comes back by itself) but could have done with a maximum of half the boost given. Manual steering is not available on the Bird, incidentally, possibly an extension of the situation that now exists with the many makes in which a manual shift transmission is no longer available—and T-Bird is also a member of the latter group. Steering around a corner at a good clip in the Bird reveals that its ground-hugging silhouette is func-





tional as well as decorative; once the weak-sister shocks finally squash down to the limit of their travel, the car goes right on around in true flat-hat manner, albeit at a considerable roll angle. This applies only when the road surface is smooth, however, as on irregular surfaces the soft springs and shocks cause the kind of wallowing you might expect from this sort of a combination.

We may seem to be carping on this "shocks too soft, power steering boost too strong" theme, but it is our belief that the sort of car T-Bird purports to be should not only sit there and look pretty, but perform as well. In other words, "beauty is as beauty does," and there's more to performance than just acceleration and top speed. Although the Bird's soft suspension caused us to down-check that portion of our investigations into its performance potential, its acceleration and top speed were more than enough to satisfy most people. The accompanying data panel shows a 0 to 60 time of 10 seconds, which we consider to be the borderline between acceptable and unacceptable performance for cars consuming more than one gallon of gas for every 20 miles traveled. Naturally, a 30-mpg car is not going to be in the same league, performance-wise, with a car of lower fuel consumption, due to the latter having a larger, and consequently more powerful, engine.

Right now is probably the proper stage of the game to interject an objection on our part to the overemphasis standing start acceleration has received. Primarily because of automotive magazine road tests, a large segment of the car buying public gauges a car's road performance by its tested 0 to 60 time. Actually, a far more accurate gauge of potential pick-up is the car's acceleration in the higher speed ranges. The 50- to 80-mph area is particularly important, as that is where you'll find the punch to pull you out of a sticky situation while passing another vehicle out on the open highway—or, worse yet, that's when you'll find said punch perhaps fatally lacking.

It is for this reason that we include in our test data the acceleration curve of the car under scrutiny, so that the reader may select the particular speed range he is interested in and compare it with other cars tested previously, or even subsequently. In the case of the T-Bird,

for instance, its acceleration isn't at all dramatic in the 0 to 60 range, but its 50 to 80 time is much better than its standing start figures to lower speeds would indicate. This is because of its aforementioned great weight, which retards off-the-mark acceleration, coupled with its small size, which helps acceleration in the upper ranges, due to the greater influence of aerodynamic considerations at those velocities.

Frankly, the over-all performance of the T-Bird, while acceptable for a "prestige car," is not impressive enough to prevent our wondering whether perhaps quite a few of the 390-cubic-inch engine's 300 ponies are not "paper horses." Helping out the situation is the 3-speed-plus-torque-converter "Cruise-O-Matic" transmission. The converter furnishes enough torque multiplication to get the car off to a good start (for one weighing this much), while the three ratios are close enough to keep the engine in close proximity to its maximum torque-producing rpm throughout the operating range of the car, if the driver is smart enough to engage the correct gear at the correct time. Even when left to itself the automatic does a good job of picking the correct gear for the occasion, but the wise driver over-rides its selection when descending long, steep grades.

The reason for this is simple—the T-Bird's brakes, while large enough for the car in size (in relation to current passenger car practice), are reduced in effectiveness for repeated applications within a short period of time because of the way the "wrap-around" styling of this car shrouds the wheels. All a brake amounts to on any car is a device to turn forward motion into heat, and unless a resource is at hand to dissipate this heat, the device reaches a point where its efficiency is negligible due to heat build-up. The means for dissipating heat from the modern passenger car brake is the passage of the car through the surrounding atmosphere. When the wheels are shrouded (particularly in the rear) as they are on the T-Bird, then the atmosphere's passage around the brake drums is impeded and the brakes, while effective for the first few applications, will not stand up to repeated usage, such as would be encountered on a road consisting of many miles of steep downgrade turns. If

you're a flat-lander, don't give it a second thought, but if you're a mountain driver, just remember that the T-Bird brakes can use all the help they can get from what retardant effect is offered by putting the transmission in 2nd gear under these circumstances.

The lack of consideration given to brake cooling by the stylist is not a criticism that could be leveled only at Thunderbird, for it seems to be an industry-wide trend to ignore the fact that brakes, like engines, must have air, fresh air, and in quantity, if they are to function as intended. One point of styling on the Bird convertible that is a specific consideration, however, is the luggage compartment. To call it that is to kid oneself, for after the top is folded into said compartment, little more than enough is left over to house a toothbrush and a safety razor. It boils down to this: leave the top up and take your extra clothes, or put the top down and go as you are.

Outside of the stylists winning the engineer vs. stylist battle in the cases of brake cooling and luggage room, the Bird impressed us as being pretty sensible from the industrial design standpoint. The seats were comfortable, and individually adjustable. Our test car was equipped with the optional-at-extra-cost 6-way power option on both the front seats and, although at first this may strike you as a piece of frivolity, it's a worthwhile thing to have on a long trip where being able to change your position to

get rid of that backache may save your having to make a half hour roadside stop. As usual, we'll leave the check-out of the instrument panel, upholstery fabric, etc., up to the showroom commandos, for it's not for us to take up space telling you about things a visit to your neighborhood dealer will reveal. The air conditioner, for instance, must be tried, to be appreciated. No amount of copy we could write could describe the fatigue reduction on a long cross-country trip effected by "air," so you'll just have to try it out for yourself. It's expensive, at roughly \$500, but once again we must remind you that the T-Bird isn't cheap to start with, and makes no pretense about being anything other than a car for the man who knows what he wants and can afford to get it.

Unfortunately, like the snake in the garden of Eden, there's a discordant note in this rhapsody of luxury—although it may qualify as luxurious in design and appointments, the T-Bird is not luxuriously produced. While the high quality of fit and finish showed poor panel fit, paint runs, etc., to be conspicuous by their absence, our test car was plagued with items that would require the purchaser to beat a frequent path to the door of his dealer during the warranty period. The right door closed only if the closer was both determined and muscular, the heater had a direct short which caused the smell of burning insulation to issue forth instead of hot air whenever it



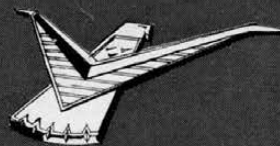


was actuated, while the hood latches were improperly adjusted, causing several "near misses" when a tester (it happened at least once to all of us) spotted one corner beginning to "flap" in time to reduce speed before disaster struck. In case "disaster" seems to be strong terminology, you've never seen what a hood that size can do to a windshield when popped at high speed. We have actually seen a car top which was damaged as badly by the hood blowing back as it would have been by the car rolling over. The broken-glass filled interior of a car traveling at high speed cannot be adequately described.

To our way of thinking, the Thunderbird is just what we termed it at the beginning of this report—the car for the man who wants to be envied. It does just what it was intended to do, and does that well; well enough that, for the man who can truly afford to pay this much for a car, it can't be considered over-priced. But we just can't help feeling that for this same amount of money, or little more, one should be able to buy what we would consider the ultimate "personal" car: a four-passenger T-Bird of "fast-back" styling (for luggage capacity) with roadworthy suspension, ever-faithful brakes, and the kind of quality construction Ford Motor Company proved it was capable of when it came out with the '61 Lincoln Continental! Who knows? The '62 models are just around the corner! ■



## CAR LIFE ROAD TEST



### FORD THUNDERBIRD

#### SPECIFICATIONS

List price.....	\$3812
Price, as tested.....	\$719
Curb weight, lb.....	4515
Test weight.....	4860
distribution, %.....	54/46
Tire size.....	8.00-14
Tire capacity, lb.....	4700
Brake lining area.....	233
Engine type.....	V-8, ohv
Bore & stroke.....	4.05 x 3.78
Displacement, cc.....	6387
cu in.....	389.6
Compression ratio.....	9.6
Bhp @ rpm.....	300 @ 4600
equivalent mph.....	118
Torque, lb-ft.....	427 @ 2800
equivalent mph.....	72.4

#### GEAR RATIOS

3rd (1.00), overall.....	3.00
2nd (1.47).....	4.41
1st (2.40).....	7.20
1st (2.40 x 2.10).....	15.1

#### DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase, in.....	113.0
Tread, f and r.....	61/60
Over-all length, in.....	205
width.....	75.9
height.....	53.3
equivalent vol, cu ft.....	480
Frontal area, sq ft.....	22.5
Ground clearance, in.....	5.2
Steering ratio, o/a.....	20.3
turns, lock to lock.....	3.6
turning circle, ft.....	40
Hip room, front.....	59.0
Hip room, rear.....	52.3
Pedal to seat back.....	39.0
Floor to ground.....	7.0
Luggage vol, cu ft.....	15.7

#### PERFORMANCE

Top speed (4600), mph.....	118
best timed run.....	n.a.
3rd ( ).....	
2nd (5000).....	88
1st (5000).....	54

#### FUEL CONSUMPTION

Normal range, mpg.....	11/14
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#### ACCELERATION

0-30 mph, sec.....	4.1
0-40.....	5.3
0-50.....	6.9
0-60.....	9.7
0-70.....	13.2
0-80.....	18.5
0-100.....	
Standing ¼ mile.....	17.6
speed at end.....	78.1

#### PULLING POWER

4th, lb/ton @ mph.....	
3rd.....	270 @ 59
2nd.....	340 @ 53
Total drag at 60 mph, lb.....	164

#### SPEEDOMETER ERROR

30 mph, actual.....	27.6
60 mph.....	57.4
90 mph.....	91.0

#### CALCULATED DATA

Lb/hp (test wt).....	16.2
Cu ft/ton mile.....	115
Mph/1000 rpm.....	25.8
Engine revs/mile.....	2320
Piston travel, ft/mile.....	1755
Car Life wear index.....	40.7

#### ACCELERATION & COASTING

