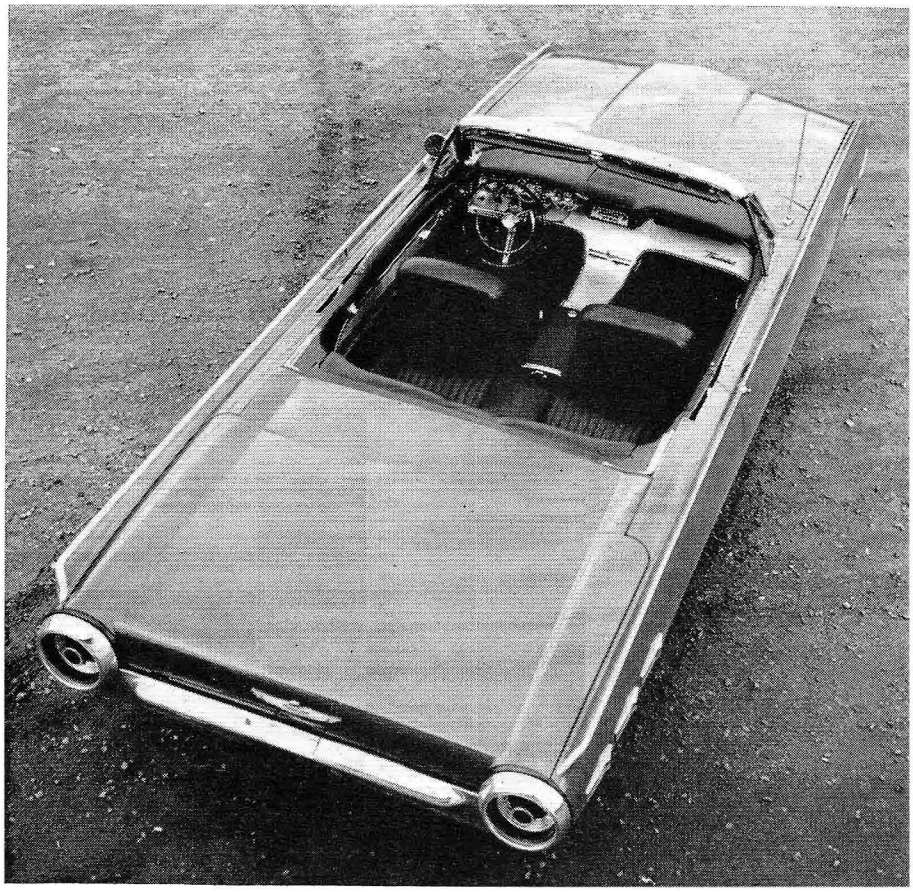


Road Test: FORD THUNDERBIRD

Ford's "personal car" boasts power, comfort and pace-setting styling

The Thunderbird is firmly entrenched as the standard for other manufacturers to emulate if they want to build "GT" or "sporty" cars that the public will buy in any great numbers. Often an object of mockery on the part of self-described "pur sang" enthusiasts, the T-Bird was never designed for that limited market. The Thunderbird was announced early in the 1955 model year, after Chevrolet had unveiled its Corvette. Both cars stirred American enthusiasts' hopes for a production domestic sports car, but neither of the then-current models was very competitive with European machinery. Starting with quite similar concepts of an American sports car, Ford and Chevy parted ways, with the G.M. car developing along race-oriented lines while Ford's was made more luxurious, more roomy and (with four seats) more acceptable to greater numbers of people.

About 53,000 two-passenger T-Birds were built by 1958, when the first four-seater was made. Corvette clung to the two-seat body, making it more habitable and mounting it on a more roadable chassis. When Ford changed to the four-place body, production and sales jumped. There were 37,892 built in 1958. The total reached 67,456 in 1959 and in 1960 it came to about 91,000.

With the 1962 model tested here, the Thunderbird is now in its third basic body style and continues to experience increased sales. The reason apparently is that the public is dissatisfied with the idea of owning merely a production car. The T-Bird was among the first American cars to cater to this desire for automotive individuality with no risk that it could not be serviced. Since then, this kind of car has been featured in the line-ups of every manufacturer, and their sales have been solid. Yet the T-Bird has a status all its own. Its excellent sales record and grasp on the public's imagination are unequaled among U.S. production cars.

The 1962 body, based on that of the 1961 car, lacks the windshield dogleg of earlier types. It has a wide, smooth hood, and the two longitudinal ridges of the 1961 car have been removed. The '61 marked the return of the bulls-eye tail lights, something of a modern-day Ford trademark. These are only slightly restyled for '62. Fender ornaments are modified.

Wide-opening doors and generous interior dimensions are found on both the coupé and convertible. Rear-seat passengers may lack knee room if front seats are fully rearward. Seats are low and soft, and the steering wheel swings away for portly drivers to get in. We felt that more rearward seat travel would be desirable so that the driver can straighten his arms, which is now impossible. The console between the seats holds heater controls and a glove compartment, giving the cockpit a sporty feel, as do its bucket-type seats.

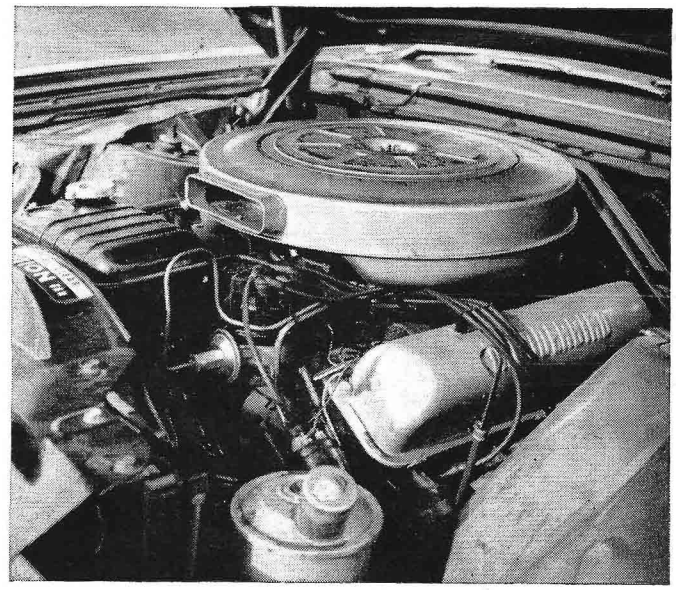
Lowering the top is an awesome sight as the rear deck rises up to swallow it. Trunk space is very limited with top down.

CONTINUED

Speed, Smoothness, Status

Engine and chassis specifications are virtually identical to the '61 model's. The 390-cubic-inch V-8 (at right) starts with a twist of the key starter. Smooth and silent, its throttle response is rapid and linear. Warm-up is quick, although the automatic choke requires a foot on the brake to prevent walking-pace creep. The Cruise-O-Matic automatic transmission has two drive ranges. "D1" is normally used, but "D2" can be engaged to reduce the torque at the drive wheels, a feature useful on slippery surfaces such as snow or gravel. In "D1," the three ratios provide lurch-free shifts in normal use. Only when pressed hard does the engine make its presence felt with fan noise and a powerful roar. At cruising speeds it is almost undetectable, and most owners would not press the car too often, since the chassis is not the type that encourages vigorous handling exercises.

The brakes on our car faded after hard use at the end of acceleration runs. The power assist stopped the car smoothly under most conditions, but with the lack of engine braking, linings would be under a severe test on many mountain roads. The steering, also power-assisted, was free from play but was too slow for fast driving on twisty roads. Feeling was vague, at best, in fast corners, and road reaction was almost eliminated, emphasizing that this is a car best suited to turnpikes, traffic, or leisurely driving. With the weight bias in the nose, the T-Bird tracked true on straights, not significantly affected by side winds or irregular surfaces. Sound insulation was thorough and effective, but badly deteriorated surfaces brought out the deficiencies of soft springs and a conventional suspension system.



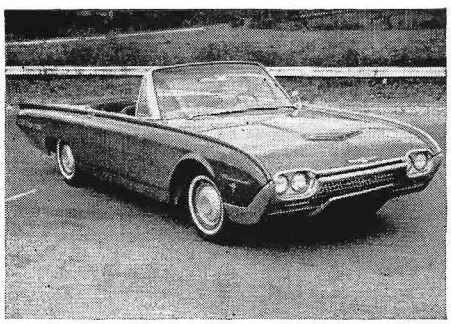
The pancake dry-element air filter and a separate radiator header tank permit low hood over 6.4-liter, 300-bhp engine.

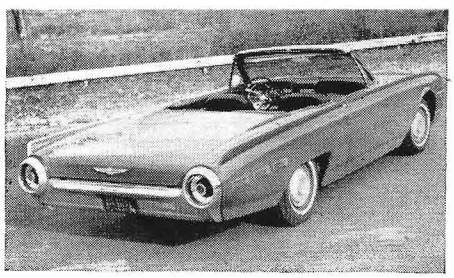
In a corner, considerable lock was needed due to the understeering nature of the car. Flooring the accelerator helped break the rear loose, but a deft touch was called for, since the steering did not lend itself to rapid corrections. These are conditions most owners will never encounter. To them the T-Bird is a fast, sporty car for daily travel, although convertible owners may be disappointed in the amount of trunk space occupied by the top mechanism. But their T-Bird is a luxury car, expensive and elegant. That it is by no stretch of the imagination a sports car is beside the point. **C/D**

FORD THUNDERBIRD

Price as tested: $4,736.20

Manufacturer: Ford Motor Company, Dearborn, Michigan





ENGINE:

Displacement	390 cu in, 6,384 cc
Dimensions	V-8 cyl, 4.05-in bore, 3.78-in stroke
Valve gear	Pushrod-operated overhead valves
Compression ratio	9.6 to one
Power (SAE)	300 bhp @ 4,600 rpm
Torque	427 lb-ft @ 2,800 rpm
Usable range of engine speeds	1,000-5,000 rpm
Corrected piston speed @ 4,600 rpm	3,050 fpm
Fuel recommended	Premium
Mileage	11-20 mpg
Range on 21-gallon tank	230-420 miles

CHASSIS:

Wheelbase	113 in
Tread	F 61 in, R 60¼ in
Length	205 in
Ground clearance	7.2 in
Suspension: F: Ind., wishbones and coil springs; R: Live axle and semi-elliptic leaf springs	
Steering	Recirculating ball
Turns, lock to lock	4½
Turning circle diameter between curbs	40 ft
Tire and rim size	8.00 x 14
Pressures recommended	Normal: 24 psi; High-speed: 30 psi
Brakes; type, swept area: 11-in drums, 432 sq in	
Curb weight (full tank)	4,400 lbs
Percentage on the driving wheels	44

DRIVE TRAIN:

Gear	Ratio	Step	Overall	Mph per 1,000 rpm
Rev	2.00		6.00	−12.6
1st	2.40	62%	7.20	10.5
2nd	1.47	47%	4.41	17.2
3rd	1.00		3.00	25.2

Final drive ratio ..... 3.00 to one

ACCELERATION:

Zero to	Seconds
30 mph	4.4
40 mph	5.1
50 mph	8.4
60 mph	11.3
70 mph	14.8
80 mph	19.6
90 mph	26.4
Standing ¼ mile	18.6