

Halfway up incline at the Ford Testing Grounds in Dearborn, one ML tester reaches out to show height of sill from pavement.



FORD Thunderbird

ROAD TEST

MOTOR Life Test Staff Report

ALTHOUGH there have been many premature reports on the performance of Ford's new personal car, the nation's road testers can't seem to agree on their figures. It's not difficult to understand. In some cases, a quick spin around the block plus some stock publicity photos have been reported as "complete rundowns" on this new car. One able reporter indicated, sagely, that the car was "faster." What it was faster than was not observed.

MOTOR Life has given the Thunderbird its standard road test. Here are the real facts about that car.

The Thunderbird or "T-Bird" as aficionados are already

nicknaming it, is a reality even if the suggested factory price of \$2695 (including hardtop) still seems like a dream to the speculators who were "sure" that Ford couldn't produce it under \$4,000, f.o.b. Detroit.

In a car market inundated with the idea that good high-performance cars should cost a lot of money, the T-Bird revolutionizes present thinking. The price of the Thunderbird hovers just around the price of a low-range convertible—but from that point on, the similarity stops. The Thunderbird, not advertised as a sports car by its creators, is very close to being one. A sports car, by

*Not billed as a Sports Car,
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definition, features excellent suspension and handling characteristics, top quality acceleration and top speed performance. A sports car has excellent power-to-weight ratio, trim, sleek lines, a dash and color not present in conventional cars plus a top-grade maneuverability in traffic and on the open road.

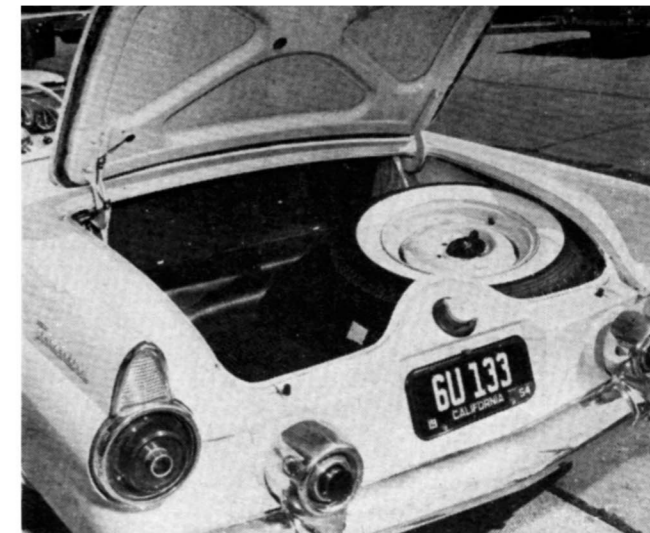
The Thunderbird does.

Road testing a product is generally accepted as routine, everyday work, not calculated to upset the entire office staff: circulation, bookkeeping, art, promotion and clerical departments. But the news of the Thunderbird road test brought restlessness to the MOTOR Life offices, first sight of the car brought trade-in ideas to nearly every member of the staff.

After driving the car, in Los Angeles and at the Ford proving grounds at Dearborn, the test staff is convinced that Ford planners will find no public apathy toward this car, that the entire "different" car movement will get a boost upstairs from the impetus of this car on the market.

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Dashboard has flattened Ford speedometer, tachometer, clock with sweep-second hand, adjustable steering wheel and seat.



Thunderbird offers adequate luggage capacity for sports-type car. Bumper guards house dual exhausts. Gas filler extends through lid.

Power plant is 292 cubic inch ohv V-8 with single four-throat carburetor and dual exhausts. The Thunderbird exceeds 115 mph.



FORD THUNDERBIRD Performance and Specifications

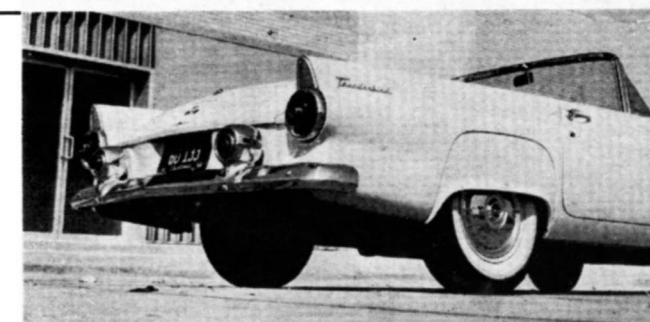
ACCELERATION	
0-30 mph.....	4.30 seconds
0-60 mph.....	10.75 seconds

TOP SPEED	
Fastest One-way.....	118 mph
Slowest One-way.....	115 mph

FUEL CONSUMPTION	
Constant 30 mph.....	20.2 mpg

ENGINE—ohv V8. Bore and stroke: 3.75" x 3.30". Compression ratio, 8.5:1. Displacement, 292 cubic inches. Advertised horsepower, 190—conventional, 198—Fordomatic.

REAR AXLE RATIOS—Conventional transmission, 3.73:1. Overdrive, 3.92:1, Fordomatic, 3.31:1.



DIMENSIONS	
Wheelbase.....	102 inches
Tread.....	56" front and rear
Width, overall.....	70.1 inches
Height, overall.....	51.9 inches
Weight (shipping).....	3225 pounds
Steering, turns lock to lock.....	3.5
Turning radius.....	36 feet

SPEEDOMETER ERROR	
At 60 mph.....	Actual speed, 56.25 mph

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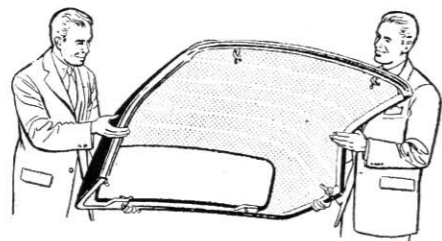
FORD THUNDERBIRD ROAD TEST

(Continued from page 47)

No prophets on the test staff, we still feel that the Thunderbird will be highly successful. And for a very simple reason: it's the American version of a sports car, roll up windows and all.

Adjustment to the Thunderbird is simple; just look at it. Or drive it. Ford has done the rest. Inside the cockpit, there's a sports car feel which will be just a bit strange to true enthusiasts: it's comfortable. The 52" wide seat will accommodate three on occasion, but has basically been designed for two passengers. The dashboard offers a real competition car feel to this roadster, it's complete with tachometer marked in hundreds, an electric clock with a sweep second hand (for do-it-yourself road testing or accurate trip logging) and a wide, flat speedometer. The steering wheel is adjustable in and out of the dash and is positioned upright for easier handling. Shift mechanism is located in a chrome gate on the tunnel and, in the Fordomatic model, the handle is complete with a thumb-push button to prevent accidental movement of the lever.

Both test cars were complete with all of the power accessories: radio, heater, four-way seat, Fordomatic, power steering and power brakes. Of that group, conventional equipment for the suggested \$2695 price will include the fiberglass hardtop, four-way seat, plus standard equipment (generally considered optional) including roll up windows, dual exhausts, four barrel carburetor, tach and the aforementioned electric clock. As a surprise move, the soft top for the car is an accessory. Nearly every speculator assumed it would be the other way around. Ford has evidently found a way to produce fiberglass tops for less cost than the bows and fabric for the soft top. For California and other sections of the country where the rainy season arrives only when expected, a soft top won't be neces-



sary and the hardtop can be leaned against the garage door for months at a time.

The 102-inch wheelbase car stands but 51.9 inches high with the top in place, is powered by a 292 cu. inch V-8 block which turns out 198 (in Fordomatic models) horsepower. Front overhang is a mere 27 inches, but the rear overhang, in order to accommodate luggage space, goes up to almost 46 inches. Even at that,

the weight distribution of the car is a very fair 52% front/48% rear.

Included on Ford's "personal car" is Ford's ball-joint suspension and a sturdy,



rigid X member frame with boxed side rails. They combine to give the T-Bird a comfortable, but firm and sports car-type ride on any surface. The test crew found the ride so much like the quick-reacting European sports cars, that the power steering (with reduced steering ratio) still seemed slow. To Americans with sports car driving experience, the car will seem to react to the wheel slowly. For those used to conventional steering, the response will seem quite rapid. It will require some getting-to-know-you driving for both groups. Those with Ford power steering on their previous family cars, will adapt most rapidly to it. The remaining groups may take all of 15 or 20 minutes to "get the hang of that steering." Pulled hard over, the T-Bird does strange things for an American car; turns arcs in its own tracks. For drivers who have never handled a car with a tight turning radius, the experience will be new—and exciting. With a tight, say, 2.75 or 3 turns lock-to-lock conventional steering, the Thunderbird would be one of the most directly maneuverable cars available—from either side of the Atlantic.

One drawback to this theory, however, is the Thunderbird's weight. Only 175 inches bumper to bumper, the T-Bird is well constructed, weighs as much, curb-side, as the Ford club coupe. Our test cars averaged 3225 pounds, and with 52% of that on the front wheels, a tight, direct steering would be aimed directly at male drivers.

T-Bird features the 1955 Ford automatic transmission (or is available with conventional and/or overdrive) which starts off in Drive-low, instead of the 1954 Drive-intermediate. The automatic shifts, under full throttle, come in at an average of 30 mph and 60 mph. The Fordomatic transmission, however, can practically be shifted at will. With a slow, rolling start, one can be in Drive-direct by 20 mph. The more throttle, the more each gear will wind.

In Fordomatic Drive Range, when the throttle is fully depressed, there is a momentary lag, a split-second hesitation

while the car hunches its shoulders for the job ahead. First driver reaction for that split-second is "it's got no pick up." Just about the time that thought is formed, something catches and the Thunderbird begins to move—and move. Although it won't out-drag some of the expensive foreign iron, the Thunderbird accelerates quite rapidly, clambers up to 60 mph in 10.75 seconds, stays strong on acceleration all the way up to a true 80 mph, where it begins to flatten out slightly. By getting to 30 mph in 4.30 seconds, the Thunderbird appears to be a real stoplight menace and it's going to take a lot more inches for the production hot rods to catch it.

Passing the 100 mph mark, the Thunderbird holds strong and true to the road, the speedo needle continues to climb steadily. Maximum speed for the Thunderbird, with automatic transmission, was 118 mph with the Fordomatic 3.31:1 gear ratio. Overdrive-equipped cars will hit 120 plus.

The Thunderbird, throughout the two testing periods, turned in average gasoline mileages of 15 mpg for city driving, 17.5 mpg for steady highway cruising.

One design item which puzzled the Motor Life test staff was the dual exhaust setup.

While Ford engineers have evidently "sold" the advantages of the dual exhaust system, the stylists have somewhat negated the engineering effort by placing a series of bends in the exhaust lines, ending up with two 90 degree turns which bring the exhaust tips out through the high-placed bumper guards. It would require a complicated analysis to illustrate the harmful effect of this move but it's general knowledge that exhaust lines should be as straight as a driveshaft. Considering chassis design, this isn't always possible—but it should be heavily considered at all times.

Summed up, the Thunderbird combines all of the best boulevard sports car qualities with a reasonable price, good dependability and what should be an excellent resale. Operating costs should be comparable to the everyday passenger car and the performance is far superior. It is well designed, has a rigid steel body, excellent handling and ride characteristics plus all of the comforts and conveniences Americans have come to expect in an automobile. Only the die-hard sports car enthusiasts (those who drive in the rain without putting the top up) will look askance at the windows and power equipment. But they're a hardy lot—still waiting for the return of the Jordan Playboy.

Early Indian tribes believed that the Thunderbird caused lightning by opening and closing its eyes, thunder by flapping its wings. Its high-performance automotive namesake will undoubtedly cause just as much disturbance—among automobile enthusiasts and those who like to drive for the pure fun of it. ●

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