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Ford Thunderbird two-seaters 1955-1957

BY BILL VANCE

Sports cars, which England began sending to North America following the Second World War, were for having fun. Flimsy canvas tops didn't offer much weather protection, trunk space was limited and rides were harsh. But with their slick-shifting four-speed manual transmissions, precise steering, wire wheels with knock-off hubs, cut-down doors and folding windshields, they offered a whole new kind of driving thrill. They quickly built up a small but enthusiastic following. There had been earlier domestic sports cars like the Stutz Bearcat, Mercer Raceabout, and Auburn Boattail Speedster, but they were too expensive to ever become very popular. It was those little affordable English roadsters that lit our sports car fire.

American auto manufacturers picked up this trend. Crosley Motors of Cincinnati, Ohio, brought out its tiny Hotshot in 1949. Nash Motor Co. of Kenosha, Wis., was next in 1951 with its lovely but expensive Anglo-American hybrid Nash-Healey.

The first of the Big Three to produce a post-war sportster was General Motors with its 1953 Chevrolet Corvette. It was a tentative step, however; GM only made 300 1953s and fitted them with a decidedly un-sporty two-speed automatic transmission. Ford wasn't about to be left behind, but it would take a different tack. Whereas the fibreglass-bodied Corvette was totally different from anything else in the model line, although based on Chevrolet sedan components, Ford's steel-bodied Thunderbird was more like a cut-down full-size Ford.

Chevrolet emulated the foreign sports cars by fitting the Corvette with drafty side curtains and a basic fabric

top. Ford called its new T-Bird a "personal car," and gave it wind-up windows and the amenities of its full-size siblings. While the Corvette had individual bucket seats, the Thunderbird was fitted with a bench type. And it could be had with a hard or soft top.

The Thunderbird used many existing parts, resulting in a strong Ford family identity. The horizontal fender line was characteristic of the redesigned full-size '55 Fords, and headlamps and tail lamps were drawn from Ford sedans. Inside, the T-bird instrument panel and hardware resembled those of the big Fords.

Under the T-Bird's hood was Ford's corporate 4.8 litre (292 cu in.) overhead valve Mercury V-8, which developed 193 horsepower when mated to the standard three-speed manual transmission (with overdrive available), or 198 with the optional three-speed "Ford-O-Matic."

Ford's new two-seater was introduced as a '55 model and became an immediate success. Whereas Chevrolet sold only 700 1955 Corvettes, even though it now had the sensational new Chevy overhead valve V-8, Ford sold 16,155 Thunderbirds.

In fact, the dismal Corvette sales had General Motors on the verge of discontinuing it, but the introduction of the T-bird convinced GM to keep it. A performance comparison with the '55 Corvette V-8 found the T-bird slower. Road & Track magazine (7/55) reported that the Corvette, in spite of its two-speed "Powerglide" automatic, could sprint to 96 km/h (60 mph) in a quick 8.7 seconds, and reach a top speed of 188 km/h (116.9 mph). They reported that the automatic Thunderbird took 9.5 seconds to reach 96 (60), and could only



manage 177 km/h (110.1 mph).

The Thunderbird was carried into 1956 with the same body, although it gained some luggage space by mounting the spare tire externally "Continental" style. A larger 5.1 litre (312 cu in.) optional V-8 developed 215 horsepower with manual transmission, and 225 with automatic. Cowl vents were added for better cabin ventilation. For 1957 the basic theme remained, but again with some changes. A new combination grille and bumper adorned the front end, and the trunk was stretched five inches, allowing the spare tire to migrate back inside, although the Continental mounting was still optional. In keeping with Detroit's fin craze, little canted blades sprouted from each rear fender of the '57 T-bird.

The bigger news was under the hood. The 5.1 litre V-8 could now be had with an optional Paxton-McCulloch, belt-driven centrifugal supercharger, bringing horsepower to 300. This supercharged 'Bird would prove to be very rare; only 208 were produced.

Power for the base 4.8 litre engine

was up also to 212, and the normally aspirated 5.1 developed 245, although a few modified versions put out more. Although it had a good year, selling 21,380 '57 Thunderbirds, this would be the last of the original two-seaters (Ford revived it in 2002). Ford Division's austere general manager, Robert McNamara, one of the post-Second World War "Whiz Kids" that Henry Ford II hired to save the company, decided there was more profit in four-passenger Thunderbirds. In so doing it left the true American sports car field to the Corvette.

McNamara would be proved correct. The larger "personal luxury" Thunderbird did earn far more money for Ford than the Corvette did for GM. But two-seater T-bird aficionados never forgave him. Those two-seater Thunderbirds are now popular collectibles.

Reflections on Automotive History by Bill Vance, Volumes I, II & III, are available at the Speed Pit, Legendary Motor Car Co., Halton Hills; online at www.billvanceauto-history.ca; or by calling 519-856-1065.

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