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# Mazda's rotary-powered RX-8 sportscar spins out another model in the R3

By JIM ROBINSON  
 Metroland Media Group

*Winkle, winkle little Wankel  
 How I wonder if your crank'll,  
 Torque enough to turn itself,  
 Or will you wind up on the shelf.*

That little poem was penned by the John Dinkel, a 20-year veteran with Road & Track magazine in the 1970s and, one of the great automotive writers of all time.

His poem kicked off a feature on the then new Wankel rotary engine that German carmaker NSU (now part of Audi) was trying to make viable.

The problem was Dr. Felix Wankel invented it to power torpedoes for German U-Boats. It was never supposed to last longer than a few minutes so trying to create a permanent rotor seal was not an issue. It was almost as thirsty as most V8s of the day. The upside was the engine was near vibration-free, light, powerful and very compact.

NSU could not make it work, as hard as they tried. Nor could General Motors, Daimler-Benz, Rolls-Royce and Citroen.

But the little known Mazda company in Japan gave it a go. After literally thousands of substances were tried, including horsehair, they got the rotor to seal at the apexes for an acceptably long period.

Then on May 30, 1967, Mazda launched the world's first twin-rotor engine car, the Mazda Cosmo Sport.

Today, four decades on, the company is celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Mazda rotary engine. In the years between, Mazda has produced nearly two million vehicles powered by the rotary engine.

The first vehicle Mazda sold in North America was the 1970 R100, powered by the rotary engine. It was followed by the RX-2, RX-3, RX-4 and RX-5 Cosmo. The 1970s even saw Mazda install the rotary engine in its Rotary Pickup truck.

When Mazda launched the now-legendary RX-7 in 1979, it really shook up the sports-car establishment and set sales records never before seen with sports cars.

And when the company launched the innovative four-door sports car RX-8 in 2003, the rotary engine saw a dramatic update with the introduction of side porting; resulting in greatly reduced exhaust emissions and improved performance.

Mazda's rotary engine has been overwhelmingly successful in motorsports, too, powering the company's cars to over 100 professional sports car racing wins in the U.S. alone and enabling an overall win at the 1991 running of the famed 24-Hours of Le Mans. Mazda was the first, and is still the only, Japanese car company to ever win this grueling endurance race. In fact, the rotary was so good, it was banned.

The 2009 Mazda RX-8 marks 40 years of the rotary and the R3 model is equipped to the point that there are no options available, but it does have more than a dozen extras never before offered on a RX-8.

Power is a twin-chamber rotary with the equivalent of 1.3-litres displacement. The R3 version is slightly more powerful at 238 hp and 159 lb/ft of torque on premium fuel. Fuel consumption is listed at 12.8/9.2L/100 km city/highway. There is only one transmission, a six-speed manual derived from the one used in the MX-5 Miata.

The new RX-8 R3 also features variable red-zone technology which limits revs at a cold start to protect the engine and allows full use of the car's uniquely broad 9,000rpm rev-band when it is fully warmed.

Much work on the chassis sees the R3 with a perfect 50:50 front to rear weight distribution that greatly increases the agility of the car. Front suspension is double wishbones with a multi-link independent system at the rear. Bilstein supplies shocks tailored to the handling characteristics of the R3.

With a redline way up to 9,000 rpm and the free-spinning nature of the rotary, getting to the rev limiter is swift, accompanied by a tenor bellow under full throttle.

Think of the rotary more like a turbine than an internal combustion engine. Acceleration is a matter of using the higher revs and learning to use the gears to get the most of the 159 lb/ft of torque.

If you push it, you'll find up and downshifts can be timed to the engine note, not the revs, because the rotary is so

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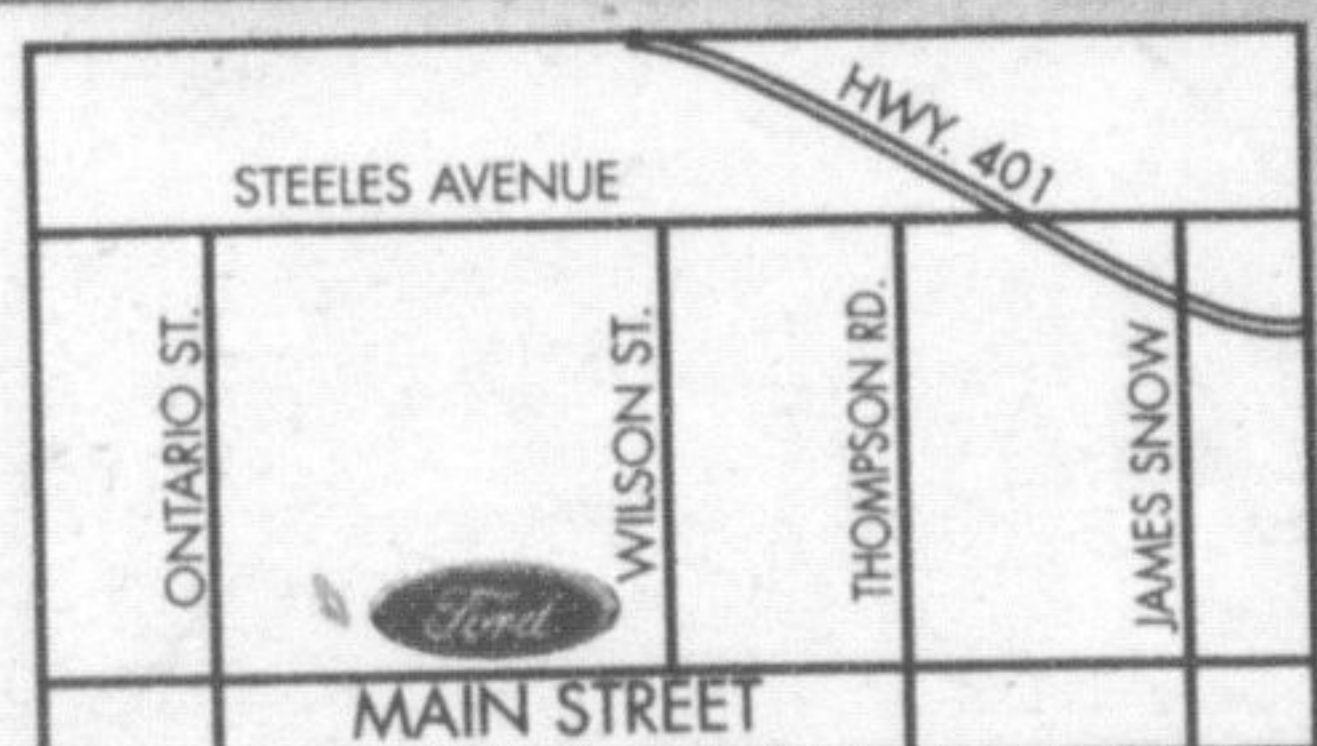
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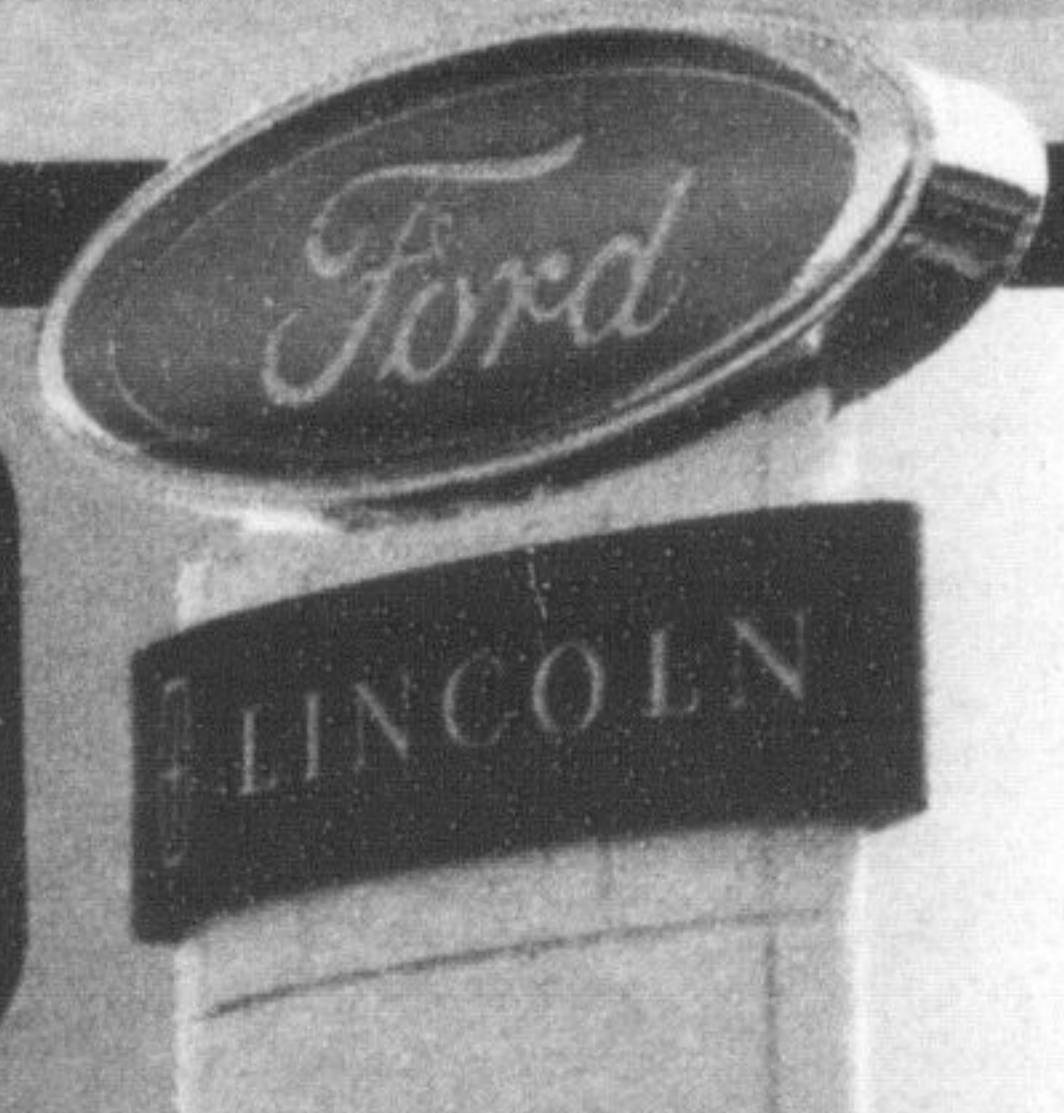
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