

A Conversation with "The Head Bird Brain"

Designer William P. Boyer good-naturedly describes himself as "the head Bird Brain" at Ford Motor Company and with justifiable pride. About half of his remarkable 33-year career with the company has been involved with both exterior and interior design for the Thunderbird, from the original 1955 two-seater through the last of the fifth-generation cars offered for 1971. At first the senior—and only—Thunderbird designer, Boyer was named manager of the special Thunderbird studio effective with the 1956 model program. In 1961, he became design executive for all Ford Division cars under design vice-president Eugene Bordinat. A series of assignments in the late Sixties and the Seventies saw him handling "just about everything in the company," including a three-year stint as chief designer for Ford's Australian subsidiary. He then returned to Dearborn, where he was named director for luxury-car exterior design and worked alongside Jack Telnack in shaping the slick new 1983-84 T-Bird and its Mercury Cougar companion. Boyer has since moved to more prosaic duties as design executive for the truck division—one of the few design posts he hadn't held. Now you know why the Ranger and Bronco II look so handsome.

Boyer recently took time out from his busy schedule to chat with Collectible Automobile™ about how the "Squarebird" came to be. (Some comments from this same interview appear in the accompanying story.) We began by asking him how the 1958-60 design looks to his eyes 25 years later:

Boyer: Well, it's very dated at the moment—very busy and dated. The main



things that it established were the low, "aerodynamic" hood and "scoop" type of mouth. And of course it was the first car that really made use of bucket seats for the driver and passenger and turned that high tunnel into a console. Those were its main pioneering features—plus it continued the formal blind-quarter roof from the removable fiberglass top of the "little Bird" and set a trend in the industry for many years in that respect.

CA: Where did you get the idea for the console?

Boyer: When you do a four-passenger car that's 52 inches high, you're left with a huge tunnel that goes through it with a rear-wheel-drive configuration. I'm a

World War II Naval aviation guy, you know, and I was used to a copilot and pilot seat with a big console and a lot of stuff on it. So it seemed natural [to me] that if there's something in the way, you just put a lot of stuff on it—make use of your problem. It was aircraft inspired.

CA: What about the roofline?

Boyer: The two-passenger hardtop was where it really started. The logical thing was to do a hardtop that echoed the styling of the convertible top, which had no quarter window because of the folding mechanism. So that was really an interpretation of a "hard convertible" top, removable, utilizing the same configuration of windows and latch-down points.

CA: Was any thought ever given to offering a detachable hardtop on the '58?

Boyer: Yes, but it was too big. The hardtop on the two-passenger Bird was barely manageable by two people, although we did have a proposal for a two-passenger Bird under consideration for '58. It was done concurrently with development of the four-passenger, but it was a two-seater with jump seats—a 2+2 with a removable top proposed. But it was still too big. We tried different front-end themes on that car, too. As a matter of fact, one of those showed up on the Mustang several years later: the high mouth and the blade bumper with the sheet metal below the bumper. That was all pioneered on a two-passenger Bird for '58 that was never utilized.

CA: Tell us about the bodyside treatment.

Boyer: We wanted a low, "aerodynamic" hood in the days when nobody gave a darn about aerodynamics per se because fuel was 29 cents a gallon. Yet we were stuck with standards that said headlamps had to be 24 inches off the ground. So that meant a low hood and relatively high lights. And you naturally ended up with "eyebrows" over the lights, which tended to generate a line of some sort in the bodyside if you didn't want big square boxes sticking up either side of this low, low hood. So, to keep the car light-looking, we evolved what we called a "clamshell" fender treatment to the headlamps. And then as we went back, we dropped into that spear on the side. The spear was an attempt to integrate a more or less flush rear bumper configuration to match the bumper/grille we'd done, which was kind of pioneering in those days. To integrate the rear bumper into the body, we evolved this protrusion. And, of course, it was getting to be kind of a large car. We felt the sides needed to be broken up with something distinctive.

CA: We know that your studio and not Engineering established the four-seater's

