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CAR AND DRIVER

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Is this the next
Cougar?

See page 46.



Mercury's MC2
concept car reveals
Ford's "new edge" future.

NEW: Ford Ranger, Lincoln Continental, Nissan Altima, Saab 9-5.

TESTED: Audi A4 2.8 5-valve, Shelton Ferrari F355 Spider,
Ford F-150 long-term, Porsche Carrera S, Subaru Impreza 2.5RS.

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CAR AND DRIVER

September

VOLUME 43 NUMBER 3 1997



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On Memorial Day weekend, Robby Gordon expected to race 1100 miles. Instead, he sat through two car-outs, crashed his Chevrolet, suffered agonizing methanol burns in his IRL car, annoyed his car owner, and may have T-boned his career. —Bob Zahn



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Mercury MC2

Is this
the new
Cougar?

BY USAMA GSHEE

The auto industry is healthy these days, but sometimes we get the feeling that the bean counters are steadily tightening their control of the business. Every carmaker seems to be in the throes of restructuring to reduce the number of distinct platforms and cut costs. The distinctiveness between models and brands is supposed to be supplied by brand management, which supposedly provides a market-research-based framework for tailoring different versions of the same underlying car. It all smacks of commodity cars contrived for non-car lovers by non-car lovers.

A striking rebuttal to this strategy is provided by the Mercury MC2 concept



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car on these pages. This winsome coupe, which was to have made its debut at the Detroit-area Meadow Brook concours last month, hews to the platform-sharing, brand-management principles. Furthermore, although neither Ford nor Mercury executives will confirm it at this point, there is an excellent chance that a car looking very much like this MC2 will hit the streets as the 1999 Mercury Cougar.

The MC2 displays the latest manifestation of Ford's "new edge" design philosophy, which has also inspired the Ford GT90, the Lincoln Sentinel, and the Mercury MC4 concept cars, as well as the Ka and Puma European production cars. Since the family resemblance among this group of cars is not terribly

obvious, defining "new edge" is not easy. Ford design boss Jack Telnack defines it as "the rational intersection of organic body panels in an elegant way." Fritz Mayhew, Ford's North American design director, says that the new-edge philosophy evolved from the increased use of computers in automotive styling. "On the computer, you develop cars using planes and surfaces, which form natural edges at the intersections."

If defining new-edge styling is difficult, looking at the result certainly isn't. Every one of us who saw the MC2 in the metal was smitten by its distinctive yet understated elegance.

Finished in a satin—don't say matte or, heaven forbid, flat—titanium paint, with nickel-plated details, the MC2's profile is subtly mus-

cular, thanks to the racy roofline and pronounced wedge shape produced by the downward-sloping character lines.

Outstanding detail execution complements the clean profile. Notice how the borders between the front fenders and the

front-bumper cover are simple extensions of the hood edges. In the rear, the same boundary is a continuation of the taillights' forward-sloping edge. Meanwhile, the leading edge of the door is simply an extension of the forward edge of the side window.

Masterful details like the nickel-plated triangular door handles serve as automotive jewelry to accent the shape. To use these handles, you simply press on the bottom half of the wedge and the handle rolls inward to unlatch the door and let your fingers curl under the handle to pull it open. It sounds more awkward than it is.

In front, the ultra-thin projector-type headlamp assemblies mate beautifully with the glittering, intricate grille at the base of the hood. In contrast, the wide lower air intake incorporates



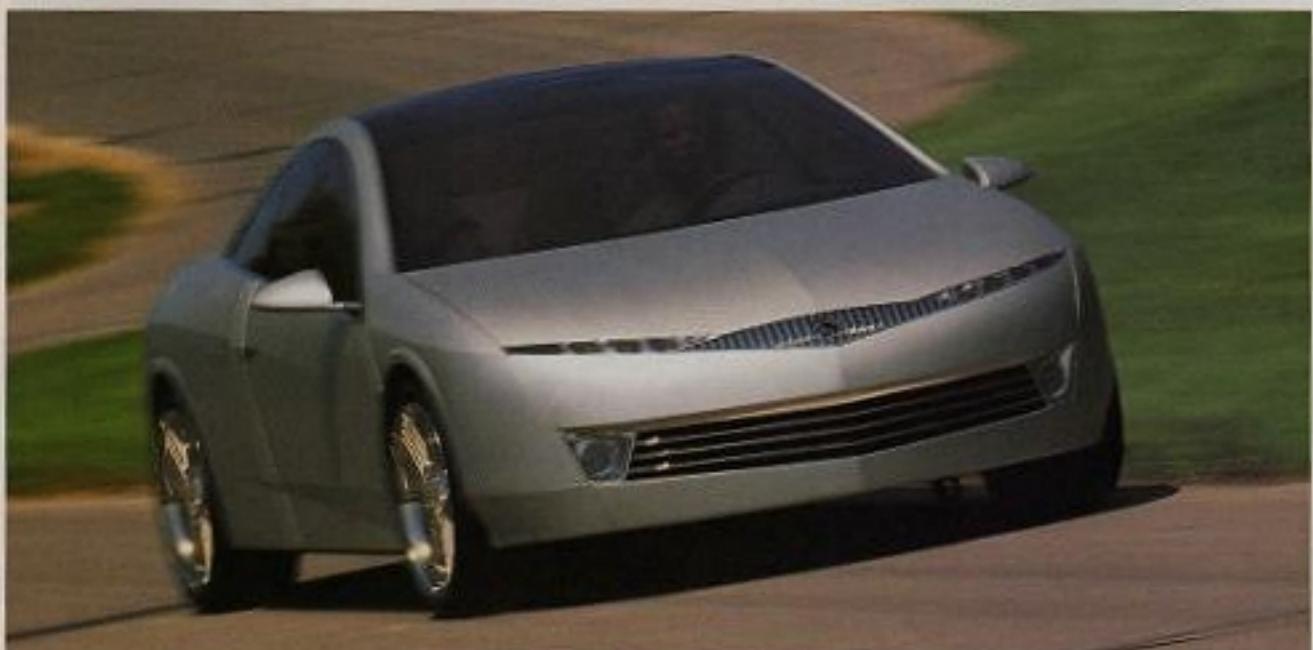
widely spaced nickel bars and large fog lights. Together, these contrasting elements give the MC2 an unusually distinctive front face.

Designed in Ford's Cologne studio by Darrell Behmer under Mayhew's direction when he was running Ford's European styling operation, the MC2 was intended to satisfy the demands of European customers for distinctive designs enveloping practical interiors. "There's more acceptance in Europe for different design," says Behmer, alluding to cars such as the Fiat Coupe, the Alfa GTV6, and the Opel Calibra that aren't exported to America.

The MC2 makes a visual statement as strong as those cars while providing the generous interior package that Europeans demand in their coupes. With more rear-seat room than a Mustang, the back seat is at least acceptable to adults for short trips, and the hatchback design combines with folding rear seats to provide plenty of cargo capacity.



The MC2's striking interior is chock-full of hard edges, machined metal fittings, and complex devices that are unlikely to make it into production. The same goes for the jalouzie-style glass top (below), which would be a nightmare to manufacture and render leakproof.



Not much of the MC2's interior styling, however, should be expected to reach production. The clever swiveling sound system that can be easily controlled by the driver or the front passenger looks terribly complicated. And the metal-edged dash panel on the passenger side isn't likely to pass any crash tests.

Still, some of the accents such as the nickel-plated pedals and shift lever could be mass-produced and would continue the jewelry theme that is so well executed on the outside. And the cloth upholstery on the doors and dashboard, along with the suede—or ultra-suede—upholstery, would serve to make the otherwise almost stark interior seem warm and inviting.

If the MC2's advanced interior and exterior styling is unlike anything else currently in Ford showrooms, its underpinnings are actually thoroughly familiar. In keeping with the platform-sharing philosophy, underneath the sleek lines lie Ford's Contour/Mystique/Mondeo sedan mechanicals with unchanged wheelbase and track dimensions. And with a five-door Mondeo already on the market in Europe, no major structural reinforcements should be needed to accommodate the MC2's hatchback.

Such an MC2-based Cougar would be a textbook example of how to use a common platform to produce a variety of



distinct vehicles. The Contour underpinnings are particularly well suited for this role, because they offer excellent road manners as well as a fine range of four- and six-cylinder engines, along with manual and automatic transmissions.

Furthermore, with the arrival of the Contour SVT, all of the makings for a high-performance version are in place. Jacques Nasser, the president of Ford's worldwide automotive operations, has confirmed as much, suggesting that a version of the MC2 might have a chassis quite similar to the SVT's.

Such a car would also serve the ends of brand management by focusing attention on Mercury, thereby helping Lincoln-Mercury general manager Jim O'Connor achieve his objective of building an iden-

tity for Mercury that stands for "fun, flair, and flexibility, not just a me-too Ford brund."

He expects that an MC2-based coupe would attract greater numbers of younger and female buyers into the division. Mercury's sole, current unique-from-Ford vehicle, the Villager, has definitely attracted female buyers, as well as customers some 15 years younger than the average Mercury buyer.

Although previous Cougar customers have been very loyal, O'Connor does not necessarily see them as the target buyers for the new version. The smaller size, the front-drive, and the hatchback layout all diverge sharply from the recently interred slab-sided Cougar. But that's not necessarily a bad thing if the new coupe will, as

Ford Puma

The Fiesta spawns a sporty performer.

One of the goals of the so-called Ford 2000 global reorganization plan is to halve the number of car platforms but produce 50 percent more derivatives of those that remain. As the Contour will sire the Cougar, so the Fiesta begot the Puma coupe.

The Fiesta platform, Ford's European mini, has already spawned the weird and wonderful Ka (*C/D*, June 1997), and the 126-mph Puma compact coupe is the next design iteration. Both of these hugely different models are supposed to get us used to the idea of new-edge design in advance of the "global" Ford Escort that will appear in Europe next fall.

The Puma is the European counterpart of the Escort ZX2. The ZX2 rides on the old Escort platform and represents the outgoing design philosophy, while the Puma illustrates Ford's new way of working. Claude Lobo is acknowledged as the father of "new edge," which began while he was the head of advanced design in Dearborn. Now he is the design director of the Small/Medium Vehicle Centre in Europe. He says the Puma is a milestone: "This is the first car that Ford has styled completely



on computer. We have proved that we can make excellent time savings and therefore react more quickly to changing market demands."

The design process for the Puma took just 135 days. It started with some 50 freehand sketches, six of which were worked up into full-size computer illustrations. From these, two were developed further—still on-screen—and the final design was chosen in a computer presentation. Only then was a full-size model made in clay. From concept to management approval, the job took a third of the traditional time.

The Puma is quite a complex shape, relatively high for a coupe and with short overhangs dictated by the unchanged Fiesta wheelbase. Coke-bottle curvatures on the flanks disguise the Puma's Fiesta silhouettes. Inside, the Fiesta instrument panel is carried over but given a different look by using aluminized plastic (instead of the

usual fake wood) and an aluminum gearshift knob. Surprisingly, it looks good.

Until the wholesale changes made in 1995, the Fiesta would not have been a promising starting point for a sporty model. But now it is recognized as one of the best-handling small European cars, and there's been universal praise for the Puma's 1.7-liter 16-valve Zetec SE motor. With variable valve timing, this Yamaha-supplied engine makes 123 horsepower.

Ford will build up to 35,000 Pumas a year alongside Fiestas in its plant in Cologne, Germany. In Europe, the Puma competes primarily with Opel's baby cat, the Tigra. There are no plans to sell the Puma in the U.S.

—Ray Hutton

Vehicle type: front-engine, front-wheel-drive, 2+2-passenger, 3-door coupe

Base price (U.K.): \$24,218

Engine type: DOHC, 16-valve, 4-in-line, aluminum block and head, Ford EEC-V engine-control system with port fuel injection

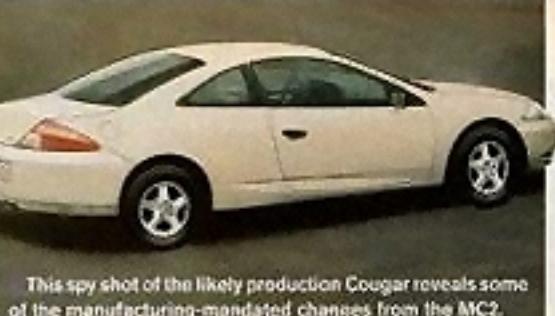
Displacement	1.69 cu in, 1679cc
Power (SAE net)	123 bhp @ 6200 rpm
Torque (SAE net)	115 lb-ft @ 4500 rpm
Transmission	5-speed manual
Wheelbase	96.3 in
Length	156.9 in
Width	65.9 in
Height	52.9 in
Curb weight	2,300 lb
Manufacturer's performance ratings:	
Zero to 60 mph	6.5 sec
Top speed (drag limited)	120 mph

O'Connor hopes, "bring in customers that would not have shopped at Mercury before."

Nor is Telnack concerned about departing from the previous Cougar. "We want people to be a little uncomfortable with the design when it is new. If they're not, then they've seen it before," he says.

We wouldn't anticipate any problems with the public acceptance of the MC2's styling, but translating its clever details into production will pose some engineering challenges. The cut-lines defining the sides of the front bumper, for example, let the front fenders extend far forward—too far forward to resist the corner blows from the DOT bumper basher.

The same goes for the front of the doors, which are so long that they require an expensive four-bar-link hinge to func-



This spy shot of the likely production Cougar reveals some of the manufacturing-mandated changes from the MC2.

tion. Among current cars, only the Lexus SC indulges such an extravagance. Can a Mercury priced in the mid-twenties or lower afford it?

The bumper basher would also make short work of the bars in the lower bumper. And how would female buyers like the lovely door handles, which require a fingertip depression uncomfortable for those with long fingernails?

We have no such concerns about the

potential road manners of the MC2-derived Cougar. From the lowest four-cylinder Contour to the latest SVT version, this platform has proven to be an unusually rewarding driver's car. We particularly like the increasingly rare combination offered by this platform of V-6 power with a manual transmission.

As a potential 1999 model, don't expect any official announcement about the MC2 Cougar from Mercury for several more months. However, it is pretty much a sure bet, and when it happens, Mercury will have taken a huge step toward defining its own identity, as well as giving coupe enthusiasts a good reason to visit Mercury showrooms again. A successful transformation of the MC2 into a production Cougar will also provide the definitive lesson on how the shared-platform, brand-managed future should look. •

The Cougar

From wild thing to pussycat.



1967

'67 Cougar XR-7 Ford's country-club division finally got its own Mustang in 1967. Only it wasn't a Mustang—it was a "sports/luxury car," with road manners like, oh, a Jaguar. The base engine was a 263-cube V-8. The two-door hardtop weighed 3005 pounds and cost \$2851. For \$324 more, you got the "6.5 Litre Marauder 390 GT engine," with a seriously indiscreet 320 horses. A big fashion item was its "cascade theme" grille with vacuum-operated hidden headlights. Cool or not, it became the division's bestselling car, with 150,893 of them built that year. On the show circuit, a spinoff XR-7S model tantalized with a 423-cubic-inch V-8 underhood.



1970

'70 Cougar Eliminator Production slipped in 1969 to 100,069 units and in 1970 to 72,343. The Cougar Eliminator version came with a 351 four-barrel V-8, but the top engine choice was the 375-horse Boss 429. The car had grown six inches since introduction.



'71 Cougar convertible The Eliminator was eliminated, and goodbye, Boss engines. The Cougar lost its pony-car look. The price was \$3,089 (\$3,877 for the XR-7 convertible). Total Cougar production slid to 62,864, but XR-7 sales increased slightly.

'72 Cougar The GT model was discontinued midway through the year. The 351 Cleveland two-barrel V-8 put out a thin 164-net hp at 4000 rpm, although four-barrel versions hung in there with some 266 horses. Buyers turned their backs in big numbers; only 53,702 were built.

'74 XR-7 Over at Ford, the Mustang was recast as some kind of Pinto compact. So the Cougar ('75 model shown here)

was transformed into a bottom-rung "personal luxury car." The XR-7 two-door hardtop was 215.5 inches long, with a wheelbase of 114 inches. It was a Montego twin, and it weighed 4,255 pounds and sold for \$4,709! A new option: twin comfort lounge seats. Dumb, you say? Guess again: 91,070 were sold.

'78 XR-7 It was the Age of the Lounge Lizard! Reskinned a year earlier, the XR-7 became a Thunderbird, sort of. Available were a four-door and a Mer-



cury Cougar Brougham. Reflecting stylish times, weight slipped to less than two tons, barely. The XR-7 was \$5,603. Dumb, you still say? More than 166,000 XR-7s were sold in '78, a record year.

'80 XR-7 Rock bottom. Blame downsizing. The Cougar was based on the Fairmont economy-car platform and, alas, got its first six-cylinders. An optional two-barrel V-6 put out 115 horses. Woe are we! The public stayed away in droves; 58,023 were built.



'83 Cougar In the go-go Eighties, the Cougar became a kind of formal Thunderbird. The base engine was a 3.8-liter V-6, although a 4.9-liter V-8 was an option. The Cougar shrank to 197.6 inches (104-inch wheelbase) and was definitely a visual improvement over the 1980-82 car. And it did well: 75,743 hit the road. The XR-7 was given a year's vacation. When it returned, its powerplant was a turbocharged four-cylinder!

'89 Cougar XR-7 Redesigned along with the Thunderbird for 1989 with an independent rear suspension, the last-generation Cougar offered V-6 or V-8 power (90 model shown here) but was criticized for being overweight (we noted in a June 1991 review, when the XR-7 sold for \$24,073, that it cost \$6 a pound).

