

SONY MEX-1GP



**TEXT & PHOTOS:
RICHARD TRUESDELL**

**THE MEX-1GP MAY BE
THE MOST FEATURE-
PACKED HEAD UNIT FOR
\$350 ON THE PLANET**



▶ Yet another GT! First it was the Ford GT drive across Europe last summer and then in the weeks after the SEMA Show in November, the GTX1, a roadster version of the car. The GTX1, which owes its inspiration to the Sebring-winning Ford GTX1 roadster of 40 years ago, is the creation of Kip Ewing, a designer/engineer on the GT group at Ford and Mark Gerisch of the Genaddi Design Group (vgdauto.com, gtx1.com), a metal bender with a penchant for cutting the roofs off a wide variety of vehicles, from the last generation Jeep Grand Cherokee (which ran a couple of years ago in CA&E) to his current passion, the Rolls Royce Phantom. At the 2005 SEMA Show, Gerisch was kept very busy taking orders for the car in the Ford booth. It was one of the must-see attractions of the event, right up there with creations of Chip Foose and West Coast Customs.

But the reason that you're seeing the car here in *Car Audio and Electronics* is because of what's on the inside, Sony's revolutionary MEX-1GP AM/FM/CD/MP3/WMA player. The MEX-1GP features a removable faceplate that doubles as a 1GB flash memory storage device, allowing you to store up to 500 songs, depending on the selected compression level.

I had the chance to do an on-road evaluation of the product on a drive from Sony's HQ in San

Diego, CA, to the Four Season's Biltmore resort in Santa Barbara, CA; and then I had a hands-on evaluation back at HQ in Sony's Mobile Electronics Technology Center, a state-of-the-art 2,400ft² skunk works, where Sony's Michael Bryceland builds many of Sony's award-winning show cars.

DRAG N DRIVE

The first thing that strikes you when walking up to the GTX1, even if you've already seen and driven the GT coupe is how utterly cool the car is, especially with the 4-piece roof moved and stowed away. Gerisch, who translated Kip Ewing's clever design into metal, has improved what is virtually a perfect design as a coupe and, in an open version, inches it even closer to perfection.

As we cruised up Interstate 15 at nearly 80 miles per hour, the first thing that impressed us was the lack of buffeting inside the cabin, making it possible to carry on a conversation or listen to whatever files you've downloaded to the MEX-1GP's faceplate. The head unit itself gives you a preview to Sony's entire line of head units for 2006, which all share a distinctive family-look design.

The system architecture in the GTX1 is quite conventional. First, Gerisch removed the huge subwoofer enclosure from the premium McIntosh sys-

tem that dominated the space between the two deeply sculptured custom Sparco seats (garnished with satin silver grommets, emulating the design of the original GT40's seats). This was necessary as there is virtually no space to store the top's four components. (The front section of the central "T" element locks into place behind the seat, concealing the subwoofer to a degree; the rear section stows under the front hood; and the two remaining panels, what were once the tops of the doors, lock in place behind each of the slick Sparcos. Gerisch notes that when production starts in the second half of 2006, the T-section will be thinner, fold in half and stow behind seats, retaining the unique waterfall styling element.)

The 800-watt 4/3-channel Sony Xplod amplifier is mounted under the front hood and covered when the rear section of the T-section is locked in place. It powers a pair of component speakers in the lower forward section of each door, augmented by a pair of tweeters flanking the head unit. While they look cool on a show car, they contribute nothing to the system. If this were my Ford GT, they would be moved and integrated into a more useful location, possibly high up in the very thick A-pillars.

On the drive up to Santa Barbara, the system sounded fine; it has enough juice to overpower



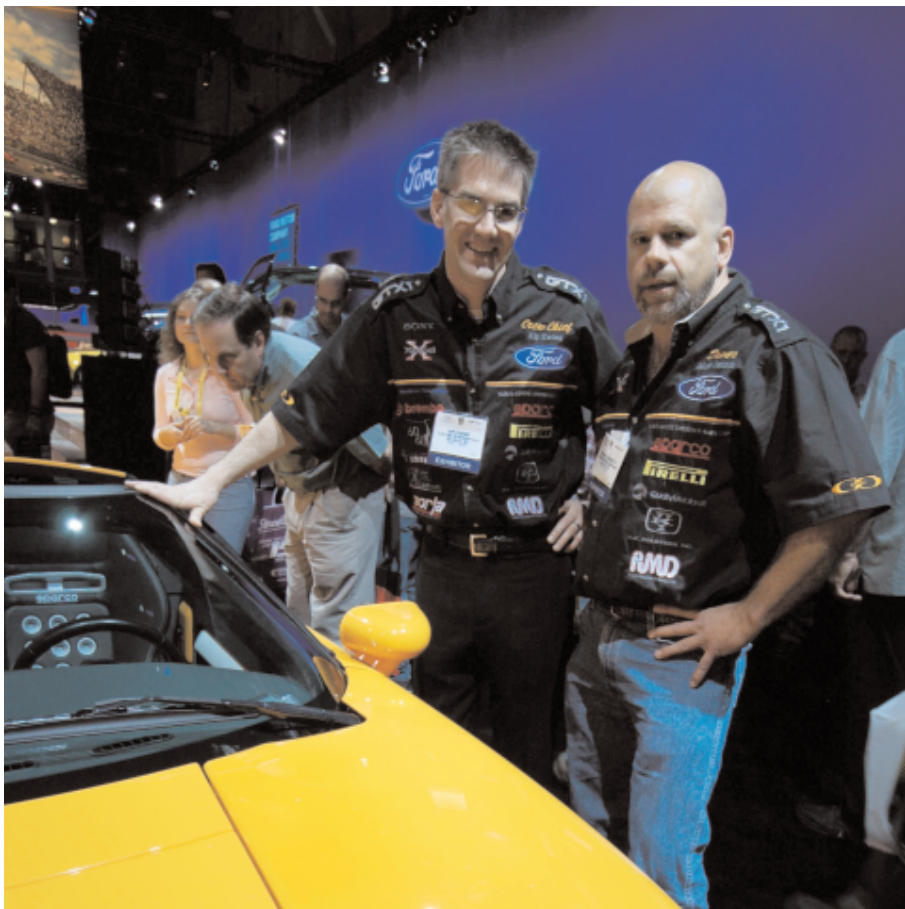
what little noise is produced by the tires and engine. (I couldn't drive over the Ewing/Gerisch speed limit of 80mph mandated for this trip, since I was driving their one-off \$500,000 prototype that would be photographed by dozens of publications after my joyride.) Gerisch paid special attention to the engine's melody by installing sound deadening blankets on the back side of the rear bulkhead, which looks damn slick and tames the symphony emanating from the 550-horsepower DOHC V8.

MEX-1GP

On the road, the fluorescent-blue high-contrast display on the MEX-1GP was thankfully visible in bright daylight with all the GTX1's top panels removed. The fairly conventional, credit card-size remote, being intuitive, was easy to use.

Back at Sony, I took some time to connect the MEX-1GP's faceplate, called a Giga Panel in Sony-speak, to my personal Sony Vaio T350, a 3.1-pound DVD-burning marvel on which my entire life is stored, including some 3,500 MP3 song files, mostly classic tracks from the '60s through the '80s. The USB-enabled faceplate attaches to the laptop via a non-proprietary USB cable with a mini connector on the end that plugs into the faceplate. It's the same cable you find packaged with many





digital cameras, so if you lose it, you'll just need to go down to Radio Shack and buy a new one for around \$10 to \$15.

Your PC will recognize the faceplate in Windows as a new hard drive as it would if you connected a compact flash card from your digital camera. In my case, I went to my music library, copied three dozen files and literally dragged them to the faceplate's folder—all very simple, no need for any additional software. If you want to segment your music, say by genre, set up different folders ('60s, '70s, hip-hop, soundtracks—up to 200 individual folders) on your hard drive, put the individual files in the appropriate folders and copy to the faceplate. The unit supports ID3 tagging.

You'll probably prefer to operate the unit with the included remote. The 4-position main controller allows you to skip through the tracks by clicking left (back)/right(forward) or scroll through your folders by clicking the up and down positions—all very, very simple.

To maximize all the potential of the \$350 MEX-1GP, which includes a built-in 52-watt x 4 internal amp with front/rear/sub preamp outputs and will hit your local Sony dealer about the time you read this, you'll need to read the manual. While most of it is much like any other Sony head unit, some instructions will be specific to the MEX-1GP. The unit is satellite radio ready and can interface with either an external XM Radio or Sirius Satellite Radio tuner, depending on your preference. There is also a CD changer interface along



SONY MEX-1GP DRAG N DRIVE

with a BUS audio input/aux-in terminal for your MP3 player or other portable digital music device.

You may wonder, as I did, if the Giga Panel couldn't have been made to double as a self-contained digital music player. Sony mobile electronics spokesperson Jenny Mehlow explained to me that this was not part of the design brief for this product, that with a 1GB capacity, the MEX-1GP was designed for ease of use so that you could easily transfer your song files for listening in the car without the need to burn a CD. When you get tired of the 500 files loaded on the Giga Panel, they could be easily replaced and if you lose the panel, you're not losing your entire music library, as you would if your iPod was stolen or damaged. She also stated that the knob, which makes the MEX-1GP such a user-friendly head unit in the car, wouldn't find as much favor on a portable player.

In the end, I have to say this is an outstanding head unit, a component that bristles with the kind of innovation that, quite frankly, has been missing from the category. For the past 18 months, all it seems we're talking about is iPod integration and satellite radio. Sony should be applauded for putting some badly needed sex appeal into the most important component of any aftermarket audio/video system, the head unit. ☼

Kip Ewing's open top vision can be applied to your car by Mark Gerisch for the entirely reasonable sum of \$38,000. If you don't already have a Ford GT but want one, keep checking those overpriced listings on eBay, then see what Ford GTs are really selling for at fordgt-prices.com, then go down to your local Ford dealer and tell him what you're willing to pay along with instructions to send your new toy to Green Bay, Wisconsin for its transformation. For the rest of us, probably as close as we'll get to owning one of these rolling chick magnets is in the form of a 1/18th scale die cast, which is rumored to be on the way.