

EXCLU

It took **Richard Truesdell** a decade to complete his story on the most exclusive variant of the fifth-generation Ford Thunderbird, which can only be considered as the ultimate car for a Mad Men-era executive.

1967 FORD THUNDERBIRD APOLLO

The 1967 to 1971 Ford Thunderbird has a full-width taillight that looks more 2024 than 1967.





SIVILITY

AT ALL COSTS

INTERIOR



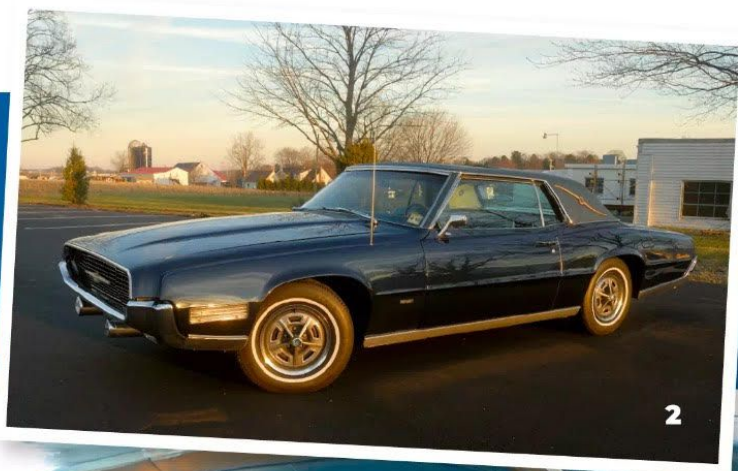
This is the story of a feature that took exactly a decade to come to fruition. I can't recall how I became aware of this car back in 2014. But having a lifelong interest and enthusiasm for the 1967 to 1971 fifth generation of the Ford Thunderbird, at the time I sought out the owner of this car, Gene Marini.

My interest in Gene's car started when my dad bought my mom a two-year-old burgundy/black four-door 1967 Ford Thunderbird.

I recall that 'Bird with a degree of fondness, thinking of when my parents took a week off to themselves and left me at

home alone with my younger brother. While they were away I took Mom's 'Bird out for a spin up and down our street. I was 15 at the time and was more than a year away from getting my learner's permit. I never told my dad. If my 94-year-old mom (who stopped driving when she turned 90) reads this story, she'll be learning this secret for the first time more than five decades after the transgression occurred. That 'Bird was the first car I ever drove.

(My dad had a thing for making sure that my mom drove a succession of cool Ford products. It started with a 1961 Ford Thunderbird, followed by a 1963 Lincoln Continental, a 1965 Lincoln Continental, the previously mentioned 1967 Thunderbird, a 1972 Lincoln Mark IV, and finally a brand new



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1 This view of the interior shows the passenger-side foot rest.

2 The front three-quarter view at dusk highlights the special blue metallic paint.

3 This rear compartment shows the custom console housing the Philco TV.



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Cartier Edition 1978 Lincoln Mark V. They share a common thread in that all were built at Ford's Wixom Plant west of Detroit.)

After learning about the car back in 2014, I connected with Gene. I arranged to photograph the car on my next visit to the East Coast to visit my mom. (My dad passed away in 2009 and was a seminal influence on my becoming an automotive journalist and a dyed-in-the-wool Ford enthusiast.) My idea at the time was to present it to one of the classic-car-focused U.S. magazines I worked with. But the stars never aligned. When Hemmings Classic Car ran a story on the car in 2014, I thought the window for that opportunity closed. That is until I started to contribute to Rare & Unique

Vehicles. When editor Pal Negyesi saw the photos, he made it clear that this unique, one-of-five 1967 Ford Thunderbird, with its unusual corporate tie-in with Abercrombie & Fitch, was a great fit for Rare & Unique Vehicles.

BACKGROUND ON THE FIFTH-GENERATION 1967-1971 GLAMOUR 'BIRDS

Before the introduction of the fifth-generation Thunderbird in 1967, the Thunderbird maintained a three-year styling cycle, was built on a unitized platform, and was available in two-door hardtop and convertible models along with the milestone companion Lincoln Continental four-door sedans and convertibles. All that changed in 1967 when the

POWER

Of the five Thunderbird Apollos originally built, Martini's is the only one that is equipped with the 390 rather than the 428 V-8.



convertible was dropped, replaced by a baby Lincoln-like four-door pillared hardtop model, and moved to a body-on-frame platform.

By 1967 Ford was already planning a Mark III luxury coupe model. It would compete with the front-wheel-drive Cadillac Eldorado introduced in 1967 (itself a spinoff of the Oldsmobile Toronado introduced in 1966), a successor to the limited-production 1956-57 Mark II model. The Mark III would be based on the four-door Thunderbird's 117.2-inch wheelbase. The 1967-1971 Thunderbird and the 1969-1971 Mark III shared body-on-frame construction and were built at its modern Wixom plant west of Detroit. (One of the last models that were produced at the plant before it was closed in 2006

was the 2005-2006 Ford GT, whose final assembly was at Wixom alongside the Lincoln LS four-door sedan.)

THE FORD / ABERCROMBIE & FITCH CONNECTION

Abercrombie & Fitch was and remains an upscale U.S.-based clothing retailer with its roots going back to 1892. It served as an outfitter to the likes of U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, explorer Richard E. Byrd, and writer/journalist Ernest Hemingway. By the 1960s the company had a chain of five stores, located in Miami, West Palm Beach, Chicago, San Francisco, and New York.

The Apollo would turn out to be a follow-up to an automotive



This is how the optional Mobile Director option was described in the 1967 brochure.

1967-1968 IMPERIAL MOBILE DIRECTOR

The Abercrombie & Fitch Ford Thunderbird Apollo was not developed in a void. The idea originated with the 1966 Imperial Mobile Executive Show Car. That one-off show car was a two-door Imperial Coupe fitted with a telephone, Dictaphone, writing table, typewriter, television, reading lamp, and stereo. It featured a swivel front passenger seat first seen in Chrysler's 300X show car. For 1967, the Imperial was completely restyled and moved from its unique body-on-frame platform to a unitized body shell shared with the full-size C-body Plymouths, Dodges, and Chryslers. The Mobile Director was an option available on the 1967 and 1968 Imperial Crown Coupes. As with the 1966 show car, the front passenger

seat turned to face rearward, and a small table and high-intensity light folded out over the back seat. It would be likely that the corporate titan would be seated in the rear with a secretary in the rear-facing passenger-side front seat, ready to take dictation. The Imperial developed a magazine advertisement for the car, and the option appears in the 1967 dealership brochure. It was a pricey option back in the day at \$597.40 (close to \$5,000 in today's dollars). The price dropped to \$317.60 in 1968.

In one version of the 1967 dealership brochure, Imperial described the Mobile Director Option in this way. "Consider – the Imperial shown above is a lavish personal coupe. With full accessories, it is a great deal more. The Crown Coupe with the Mobile Director option introduces a new way to travel.

The front seat armrest pivots to become a conference table. The high-in-

tensity reading lamp is portable. The passenger seat swivels to face the rear. Now you may work your way to work. Or chat facing rear-seat companions. Imperial '67 – a new style of travel. A style you can discover for yourself. At your Imperial dealer's." (A copy error that slipped through the proof-readers in 1967.)

Like the Thunderbird Apollo, don't you think that the Mobile Director option would have been more practical if it was offered on the four-door model? The only reason that I can think it wasn't could be that the larger opening of the two-door model was required for the front passenger seat to swivel 180 degrees to the rear. Very few were sold, probably less than 100 over the two-year availability (probably prompting the 1968 price reduction). After the 1968 model year, the Mobile Director option simply disappeared from the Imperial option list.

tie-in from 1966 when the company worked with former World War II fighter pilot, famous race car driver in the 1950s (he was the co-driver of the Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR that killed 83 spectators and driver Pierre Levegh at Le Mans in 1955), and 1960s specialty-car builder John Fitch. The Fitch Phoenix was displayed at its New York store, and orders were taken for it at the other four stores during the 1966 holiday season after the Fitch Phoenix was canceled. In 1967, Abercrombie & Fitch approached Ford for the follow-up. The two companies got together to produce and market one of the most unusual Thunderbirds ever conceived, one that could have been executive transport for James Bond. (Ford had an existing tie-in with the James Bond franchise. Bond

Girl Tilly Masterson drove a white Ford Mustang in 1964's Goldfinger. In the same movie, CIA agent Felix Leiter drove a Ford Thunderbird coupe, Goldfinger's stud farm had a 1964 Country Squire, and Mr. Solo had a crushing engagement in a 1964 Lincoln Continental.) Five Apollos were built by established Ford collaborator Dearborn Steel Tubing (DST). This was the same company that produced the 100 legendary 1964 Ford Fairlane Thunderbolt homologation drag racing cars and what would serve as the template for the first pony car, the 1963 Ford Mustang II concept car. It was at DST where the five cars received their mobile office upgrades. It was thought that the car was inspired by Chrysler's 1966 Imperial Mobile Executive show car (see separate sidebar for its story).

1 The ship-to-shore radio-telephone is pre-cellular.

2 The rear-facing 12-inch B&W TV still works but is analog, not digital.

3 The factory Tilt-a-Way steering wheel (note the OEM speed control buttons on the padded hub) makes it easy to slide behind the wheel.



THE PROCESS AT DST INCLUDED THE FOLLOWING MODIFICATIONS

1. Cutting holes for electric sunroofs (these would become a factory Ford option in 1969 through American Sunroof Company, also known as ASC, which also installed about 200 power sunroofs in the Thunderbird's smaller sibling at the time, the 1967 Mercury Cougar, along with an undisclosed number of two-door 1967 Lincoln Continental two-door hardtops)
2. Transforming them into landaus with blue vinyl roofs (because of the planned sunroof installations, the cars came from Ford's Wixom plant as two-door hardtops without the landau package)
3. The custom blue leather upholstery
4. Foldaway desks in the front seatbacks
5. A footrest in the reclining (but not swiveling) front passenger seat
6. A custom full-length center console
7. A modified split rear seat
8. A Philco (a Ford subsidiary at the time) black-and-white television set
9. The ship-to-shore radiotelephone (precursor of today's cellular systems)
10. The trunk-mounted aerial for the television
11. Interior reading lamps
12. The ice detection system
13. The single front-mounted fog lamp

It has been reported that the cars cost Abercrombie & Fitch \$10,000 each to modify, beyond the standard-production \$4,483 factory MSRP. After their in-store duties were completed, they were sold to the four buyers for an undisclosed sum. (The program would serve as a precursor, more than a decade later, of the aftermarket auto electronics explosion by companies including Alpine Electronics and Sony.) After the four remaining Abercrombie & Fitch Ford Thunderbird Apollos had completed their promotional run, it was always intended to sell the cars to get back some of their investment. Their overall cost in 1967, almost \$15,000, translates to \$140,000 in 2024 dollars, making them a consequential

HIGH-TECH

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investment on Abercrombie & Fitch's bottom line. Since no mechanical modifications were made to their mechanical components, it's assumed that the balance of the Ford factory warranty would pass on to their four owners. These were show cars rather than concepts, complete with VIN and titles. By the start of the 1970s, A&F had run into financial difficulties. In 1976 the company declared bankruptcy, and it closed its flagship New York store in 1977. The brand went dormant for several years before it was resuscitated by another U.S. chain, Oshman's. The company survives to this day, first becoming part of L Brands (The Limited, Victoria's Secret) before it was spun off as its own publicly

traded company. Today, it is the retailer of choice for several generations of preppies and known for its infamous and controversial, sexually charged marketing campaigns.

TIMELINE OF THE CHICAGO ABERCROMBIE & FITCH FORD THUNDERBIRD APOLLO

Current owner Gene Martini bought the car in 2004. "I enjoy it, even though I'm a Chevy guy," says Martini. "It's unrestored. It's the car that was displayed in the Chicago store, and it's the only one of the four with the 390 V-8. It was first sold to Mr. Polsinelli when its in-store duties were finished. Then, in 1989, it showed up with a relatively recent repaint at

DESIGN

1 Can you imagine pulling into a diner back in 1967 in a Thunderbird Apollo?

2 The unique Icelert sensor is mounted on the front valance on the driver's side.

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the Kruse Auburn auction, where my brother-in-law Lloyd bought it for \$5,800. He ended up parking it, and for another 14 years, it sat largely unused until I asked about it. He said I could have it if I got it running and out of his garage. So despite my Bowtie loyalties, I took on the challenge just because it was such an unusual car.

"I have no issue pointing out the car's few flaws. The most notable are the special gold-anodized badges and Thunderbird scripts that have dulled over time. But I can't remove them without removing the special sunroof-accommodating headliner. So I decided to leave them as they were for fear of making the car less original. All of the add-ons still work,

even the back-seat television except for the fact that it's an analog set and today, all broadcasts are digital. The same holds for the ship-to-shore telephone. The analog system is no longer in operation."

On the flight back home after I photographed the car, I thought if it was my car, I would have a hidden VCR play a loop of the top TV shows from the 1966-1967 season. These would include the number-one show, *Bonanza*, variety shows like *The Red Skelton Hour*, and classic sitcoms like the *Andy Griffith Show*, *Green Acres*, *Bewitched*, and *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Those shows, the comedies especially, were my favorites growing up, being a child of the Sixties born in 1954.

3 Martini's Apollo, because of the installation of the sun-roof, was originally a non-vinyl roof two-door hardtop.



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THE CARS OF THE MAD MEN TELEVISION SERIES

On the popular 2007-2015 AMC television series *Mad Men*, the prop masters had a field day procuring several dozen period-correct cars for the series' 1960s era. Milestone cars that appeared in the series included a black 1961 Lincoln Continental, the red 1964 Imperial convertible driven by hard-charging ad executive Don Draper, a red 1964 Jaguar XK-E, a 1968 Mercedes-Benz 280SL, several Cadillacs, and a multitude of more mainstream cars to populate the New York City and suburban settings. It's a virtual feast for the eyes of mid-century car enthusiasts. Most of the cars are documented and catalogued on the *Mad Men* page on the Internet Movie Car Database (IMCDB). But alas, no Ford Thunderbird Apollo makes an appearance as Abercrombie & Fitch was not a client of the fictitious Sterling Cooper Advertising Agency. Too bad for that. You can watch the series and all the amazing cars on the U.S. streaming service AMC+, which can be accessed worldwide through Amazon Prime Video.

4 Standard wheels with special badge.



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As the Sterling Cooper team gets ready to pitch Jaguar, Don Draper sees himself in the client's product.

For his first Antique Automobile Club of America (AACA) show (check out Martini's YouTube interview video when he showed the car at the 2014 AACA Hershey Fall Show), Martini earned a Junior Award for the Apollo. Martini noted that the Miami and West Palm Beach cars have survived, as has the New York car. That means that all four cars that made it to their respective stores have survived the 57 years after they rolled down the Wixom, Michigan, assembly line. (Another personal note. While I was researching the background of the car online, some enthusiasts noted that the car would have been more practical if it had been based on the all-new four-door version of the Thunderbird. I certainly

agree with that viewpoint. But as with the Imperial Mobile Director, the two-door variants were seen as more exclusive.) Having owned the car for almost a quarter of a century, Martini now is planning its succession. "It's been fun having owned the car since 1999.

The car always attracts an admiring crowd, especially among aging baby boomers. But we're not going to live forever. I think it's important that these mid-century automotive artifacts survive. So if you're interested, reach out to me at the car's Facebook page I maintain. Let's talk. I want to make sure it moves on to a new owner who will appreciate and cherish it as much as I have." ♦