The Thunderbird With A Jet Engine

You heard it right! A genuine Ford Thunderbird with a Boeing Turbine (Jet) Engine!

American auto pioneer Ford debuted the Thunderbird on February 20, 1954, at Detroit's first post-war auto show. But in December 1955, Ford engineers were already experimenting with shoehorning a Boeing T50 turboshaft engine under the Thunderbird's hood.

According to the archives, Ford built the Turbine Thunderbird "to obtain a usable and reliable gas turbine vehicle for appraising" while studying the "special advantages and problems associated with this type of powerplant." The engine in question is a Boeing 502-8C Series jet engine that pumped out 175 horsepower and tipped the scales at about 330 pounds (150 kgs), said Macs Motor City Garage.

To help reduce costs, Ford routed gigantic exhaust pipes through the front fenders, creating an aggressive, muscle car vibe. It also came with a unique raised hood with scoops and louvers at the rear. Other neat design cues include relocated parking lights, custom made side air intakes flanking the front grille, and aircraft-inspired air scoops behind the rear fenders.

The idea of a turbine-powered Thunderbird looks good on paper, and it's safe to say that Ford also nailed the design aspect. But according to Ford's report, the concept's performance was a mixed bag. There was "serious acceleration lag in start-up" despite offering "good medium speed performance." The positive aspects include a brilliant power-to-weight ratio, no vibrations, and negligible routine maintenance since jet engines have fewer moving parts.

The downsides? Ford mentioned "the undesirability of the front exhaust," which we believe pumped out ear-busting decibels of noise inside the cabin, not to mention the heat emanating from an aggressive, powerful gas-fed jet engine used to power military tanks and antisubmarine drone helicopters. Furthermore, the project cost Ford $188,000, a considerable amount of money in 1955. If built today, it would translate to nearly $2 million. The Thunderbird Turbine never made it to production (unlike the limited-series Chrysler Turbine Car by Ghia)

Production cost ended up being a significant factor that killed the turbine with Chrysler. It's possible that Ford came to a similar conclusion back in the day.

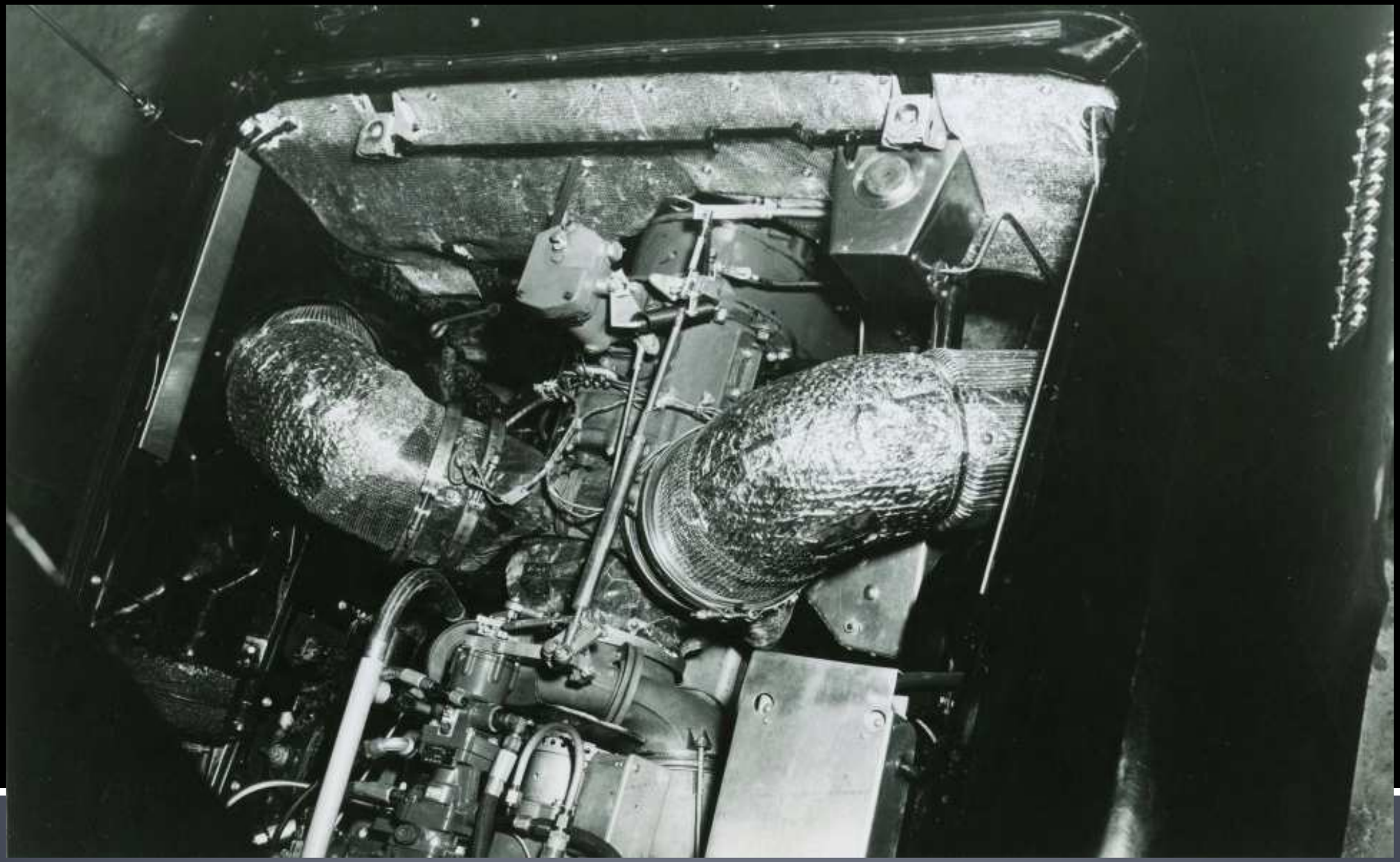
Still, we *really* like the idea of a Thunderbird actually dishing out a bit of audible thunder.

The experiment did not lead to the mass production of turbine-powered Thunderbirds, and the project was largely kept a secret until around 2022, when it was unveiled to the world by Ford archivist Ted Ryan.

The fate of the prototype is unknown, but given that Detroit automakers had a habit of scrapping experimental vehicles, this T-Bird was probably destroyed. But it's cool to know that Ford once built a Boeing jet engine powered sports car that actually ran.

Notice the large hood scoop needed to cool a turbine engine.

Air intakes replaced the front parking lights and large scoops were added to the rear fenders.



The Boeing Turbine Jet Engine in the T-Bird. Note the insulated box placed over the master cylinder to prevent the brake fluid from boiling.

A pretty racy looking little Thunderbird

The Chrysler Turbine Car

The Ford Thunderbird With A Gas Turbine Engine: A Forgotten Prototype