

## MUSTANG SAYS GOODBYE TO ITS FORMER SISTER CARS MERCURY COUGAR AND CAPRI

By John M. Clor

If there's one constant about Mustang people, it's that we have a real sense of tradition when it comes to Ford's famed pony car. Much of it is steeped in the car's colorful history, while some of it—like the all-too-common blind disdain for the Mustang II—is based more on folklore than on facts. And yes, I plan to get in touch with Jay Leno and tell him that his joke about the "II" during his video review of the new Mustang was uncalled for. I would have expected more from such a knowledgeable enthusiast, and will send him a copy of my "Mustang Dynasty" book to help him put the Mustang II into the context of the times, so that he can take his performance frustrations out on that particular era, and not on the car. But I digress ...

The major role that the Ford performance enthusiast has played in shaping the course of Mustang history cannot be denied. While that has been a real blessing in helping to distill the essence of the Mustang brand over the years, it has also created a huge challenge for all of those who have worked on Mustang programs at Ford. I think the best explanation of that phenomenon was the one that Hau Thai-Tang had offered me in the foreword of "Mustang Dynasty" when he wrote: "... I joke that the best part of working on Mustang is that everyone knows what a Mustang stands for; the worst part is that everyone knows what a Mustang stands for—and they are more than willing to tell you. ..."

So while the five generations of Mustangs to date are quite different to all of us, they have all still remained true to the Mustang brand identity—thanks to proper decisions made by Ford product planners and this unique relationship they have enjoyed over the years with Mustang customers. But like any successful product, variations on a theme can sometimes prove quite profitable as well, and hence Mustang from time to time has brought along to market a couple of very close siblings, both of which were marketed under the soon-to-be-out-of-business Mercury brand.



On the heels of a memorable ad campaign that said, "You've got to put Mercury on your list," I'm sure that by now you've heard Ford is retiring its mid-level Mercury line this year, phasing out the current crop of Mercury vehicles, and pulling the plug on production by the end of 2010. The brand was launched back in 1939 by none other than Henry Ford's son, Edsel, and in the early years at least the cars became known for their dramatic styling and performance. (The name "Mercury"

was not borrowed from the innermost and smallest planet in our Solar System, but rather comes from Roman mythology and its "messenger of the gods.") History buffs will recall that the late actor James Dean helped turn the 1949 Mercury into an icon with the movie "Rebel Without A Cause." I must admit that my dad became smitten with the big Mercs of the late 1950's and drove them right on through the '70s before eventually graduating to the Lincoln line.

My car-guy brother, Jerry Clor, got dad's hand-me-down 1957 Mercury Monterey (a finned, red-and-white, two-tone beauty complete with a 4-barrel 312 V-8 and push-button Merc-O-Matic trans) as his first car, and so it's understandable that later in life he went on to buy and restore a couple of show-winning '57s of his own. But my Mercury love came somewhat later, when I first laid eyes upon the 1967 Mercury Cougar.

At the time I had no idea that it was built off the newly enlarged '67 Mustang, and on the very same production line as all the 'Stangs at the famed Dearborn Assembly Plant. And I didn't know at the time that underneath, its Mustang platform was stretched some 3-inches to accommodate that swoopy new sheet metal; all I knew was that I liked everything from the "electric shaver" grille that was hiding the headlamps, all the way back to the full-panel, T-bird-style taillights with those cool sequential turn signals. The Cougar sure didn't look like any badge-engineered Mustang to me—nor to the nearly 151,000 people who bought one that first year.



From the 390 V-8-powered GT Package Cougars right on up to the luxurious XR-7 models, these cars were meant to offer a European flair, and certainly had their own personality right down to the interiors. You could get a wood-grained steering wheel and dash appliques, a full line of instrumentation with race-car style toggle-switch controls, T-handle, center-console shifter for the automatics and plush vinyl or even leather seating.

My favorites came from 1968 on, and included the "Dan Gurney Special" (named after Mercury's road racer) with a hot 302, 390, or 428, hood scoop and pins, and Lucas fog lamps. Just 619 "XR-7Gs" were produced, and only 14 of those were equipped with the 428 Cobra Jet engine. If that wasn't hot enough for you, a mid-year 7.0L GT-E package was available that packed the punch of Ford's 427 big-block! I've seen some 428 Cobra Jet GT-E Cougars with the Ram Air setup, but they are very rare. Word is that a total of just 602 GT-Es were produced: 358 with the 427 and 244 with the 428.

Cougar shared the collector muscle car spotlight with Mustang again in 1969 when a new "Cougar Eliminator" package was introduced to replace the XR-7G and the no-

longer available 427. A new 351 4-barrel V-8 was standard, and options included the 390 4-barrel, 428CJ and a Ram Air induction system—even the Boss 302 engine! (Historians say that only two Cougars were ever built with the Boss 429 engine, making them the rarest of all performance Cougars ever produced.) The Eliminator's blacked-out grille, stinger side stripes and front and rear spoilers were backed up with performance tires and a handling package. For my money, these babies are the cream of the Cougar crop!

Cougar remained a sister car to the Mustang for a total of 7 years, sharing restyle and powertrain timing with Ford's pony car right on through 1973, after which it was upsized to the Torino platform while Mustang was downsized to Mustang II dimensions. While attempts to rejoin the nameplates came along over the years, the 1967-'73 Mustang and Cougar were great examples of successful platform sharing while building on the unique identities of both brands.



The other Mercury "sister car" to the Ford Mustang was the Capri. No, not the sporty subcompact Mercury Capris that debuted in 1971. Those 1971-'74 Capris and the revamped 1976-'77 Capri IIs were 4-cylinder and V-6 models imported from Germany. (And later, the little 1991-'94 ragtops of the same name were imported from Australia.) Rather, I'm talking about the 1979-1986 Mercury Capris that shared a platform with the Fox-Body Mustang.

The Fox-based Mercury Capri differed from the Mustang via a squared-off front fascia and grillework, bulging flared fenders, and – in 1983 – the addition of a curved-glass "bubble-back" hatchback and unique rear bumper and taillights. The next year, a performance version called the "Capri RS" got a front air dam that proved popular, but Ford wasn't able to provide the same level of differentiation for the Capri's interiors.

My favorite Capris from this era were the "Black Magic" models that ran from 1981-'83. The black paint with gold striping really set these cars off from the crowd—and even included gold-tint alloy TRX metric wheels. The theme was continued



inside, with black seats featuring special gold-colored inserts. Yes, somehow you could actually order a "Black Magic" Capri in white (dealers dubbed them "White Lightning"), but I'm told these versions were pretty rare, with only 575 made in 1981 and just 348 in '82.

Of course, the 5.0 V-8 and the Turbo 2.3 versions made the Fox-based Mercury Capris much desired by performance fans. Other special models came later—a "Crimson Cat" in 1983 that featured red paint with gold striping and seat inserts, and the "Capri RS Turbo" in 1984 that featured a Charcoal upper and Silver lower paint scheme. And who can forget the tricked-out, hot-rodged 1984-86 ASC McLaren Coupes and the super-rare, semi-custom Convertibles? Those are true collector Mercurys in anybody's book. And when you add in the 30 Mercury Motorsport Capris that ASC built in 1985 as pace cars for the Detroit Grand Prix race, you have one of the most desirable Fox-Body cars ever produced. (Only about 20 of them are known to exist today!)

With Cougar and Capri, the Ford Mustang had a very good family relationship with Mercury, so Mustang fans should have a special place in their hearts for this soon-to-be discontinued Ford brand. If you happen to own one of these Mustang sister cars, perhaps they will increase in value in the upcoming years? No matter, as there's one thing that will always qualify me as a true Mercury fan: I actually know all of the words to Alan Jackson's song, "Mercury Blues."

Brother Jerry and I can almost harmonize on "... Well if I had money, Tell you what I'd do, I'd go downtown and buy a Mercury or two—Crazy 'bout a Mercury! ... "

Farewell, Mercury! You may be gone soon, but you'll never be forgotten by Mustang fans!

**Editor's Note:** Veteran automotive journalist John Clor has owned, raced, worked on or written about Fords and Mustangs for nearly 30 years. After a 15-year career at The Detroit News, Clor shifted to automotive journalism with stints at AutoWeek and later Edmunds.com. He joined the Ford Special Vehicle Team in 1995 and had spent the better part of the next decade working on SVT communications, PR and Marketing. Today, he manages [www.FordPerformance.com](http://www.FordPerformance.com) for Ford Racing, and is also a columnist for Mustang Enthusiast and Mustang Trader magazines, editor of SVT Enthusiast magazine, and author of a hardcover book, "The Mustang Dynasty." Clor is also the proud owner of three '70s-era Mustangs, including one he calls "a long-term project."

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