

Nina and the T-Bird:

A Modern Cruise Down Memory Lane

By Roger Witherspoon



In 1970 there was a nondescript dive on a slim street about halfway between Newark City Hall and the skeletons of buildings torched in the city's race riots, which I remember mostly from the cheap, large drinks and the Thunderbird often parked outside. There was nothing particularly distinguished about the joint, except for this woman who grew up in the area and sometimes could be spotted drinking alone at the end of the bar. Mostly she was silent, lost in her own world; though sometimes she hummed quietly and tapped a slim finger on the bar as that week's itinerant jazz combo played nearby.

But on one of those infrequent nights when I spotted her there, humming wasn't enough. She held out a thin hand and said to the singer, "Let me have the mike, Sonny."

The young vocalist, obviously annoyed, tried to ignore the old lady drinking in the corner. But the bar owner, knowing better, quietly took the mike and handed it to her. She smiled at the owner, and then Nina Simone began to sing.

For the next two hours she spun her magic from that quiet stool. Outside that bar, the world dealt with Watergate, racism, the War in Vietnam and Newark continued its urban decline. But inside, for that two hours, all was right with the world.

That 35-year-old memory came tumbling out the moment I laid eyes on the 2004 Ford Thunderbird Roadster. This is the 50th anniversary of one of the nation's first American muscle cars, what was then considered a "cool ride", particularly the ragtop model which the Beach Boys enshrined with one of their surfer hits.

This new T-Bird has a retro styling, updated to smooth the rough edges of what was considered aerodynamic in the '50s. I was stopped more than once by admirers who thought this was a well-kept classic. But the new, two-seat Thunderbird is a clearly modern roadster that deftly pays homage to the T-Birds of old. The exterior features a classic egg-crate chrome grill lifted from the 55-57 models and a hood scoop borrowed from 1961. Completing the look on the hard top are round, porthole windows towards the rear.

But that's where the similarities end. The T-Bird looks old, but rides like a modern sports car. The roadster comes with either a removable hard top or a more traditional ragtop. The test car had the hard top version, and while it fits easily into the trunk, it weighs 83 pounds, and getting it in there takes some work.

Under the hood is a 3.9 liter, 32-valve aluminum V-8 producing 280 horsepower and 286 pound-feet of torque. It has the quiet roar I remembered from my teenage years, though with the windows closed the only sounds are those enveloping you from the radio or in-dash 6-CD changer. While the Thunderbird is a rear wheel drive car, I was pleasantly surprised to find it handles like a front-wheel drive sedan on snow-covered and icy New England roads.



The test car came with the optional drive format, allowing you to operate as either a 5-speed automatic, or a 5-speed manual with an electronic clutch. In icy weather or heavy traffic, it was best to drive in automatic mode and let the traction control – which certainly wasn't around 50 years ago – ensure a level ride.

But when the sun is out, leave the automatic alone. In manual mode, the roadster is not a racer. *Motor Trend* clocked it accelerating from 0-60 miles an hour in 7 seconds, and the top speed only is 135 mph. Which means it will get you there in a decent time, and you can drive all day with the scenery a satisfying background blur. The test car averaged 20 miles per gallon, a significant improvement over the care-free roading days

of a half century ago. And in manual mode the T-Bird is as effortlessly responsive, quick, and as steady at 60 as it is cruising at 110. And just as quiet.

The interior styling has a 50's feel, with large swaths of streaking, seamed chrome breaking up the two-tone leather decor. There is a surprising amount of leg and elbow room, even for some of my over 6-foot friends. There is a rear shelf for briefcases, purses, or small bags, and even enough room for the seats to recline about half way. The leather-wrapped steering wheel both tilts and telescopes, and the heated seats are really appreciated at this time of year. It has a full trunk, though the space pretty much disappears if the hard top is inside.

The retro look isn't for everybody. My teenage daughter simply pronounced it "old." But what does she know.

On a sunny afternoon, I loaded the CD changer with a few old friends – John Coltrane, Smokey Robinson, Miles Davis, B.B. King, Marvin Gaye and, of course, Nina – and simply drove through the New England countryside. Outside the T-Bird, the world dealt with a struggling economy, racism, guerrilla wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and continuing urban decay. But while the music played and the V-8 hummed a bass line, the world was just fine.



Test Car:

2004 Ford Thunderbird Roadster

MSRP:		\$41,590
Mileage:	18 mpg city	24 mpg highway

Performance:

0-60	7.0 Seconds
Max Speed:	135 mph

3.9 Liter DOHC aluminum V-8 with electronic sequential fuel injection, delivering 280 horsepower and 286 pound-feet of torque; 5-speed automatic with overdrive or 5-speed manual; power variable-assisted rack and pinion steering; independent short- and long-arm front and rear suspension.

Comfort:

AM/FM stereo w/ 6 in-dash CD changer; heated leather driver/passenger seats; power adjusted seats; leather armrest, steering wheel; tilt and telescoping steering wheel; removable roof; zoned temperature controls.

Safety:

Driver and passenger front and side airbags; all-speed traction control; perimeter anti-theft system; chrome cast, 16-spoke, 17-inch aluminum wheels.