

The Sexiest Little Capri

Lincoln-Mercury
didn't bring
you this one

by Don Green

PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

Hey," the voice shouted from the dark opening of a garage entrance at a Sunset Strip office building.

"Hey," the voice yelled again as a body appeared to carry the voice out of the dark into the afternoon sunshine. "What kind of car is that?"

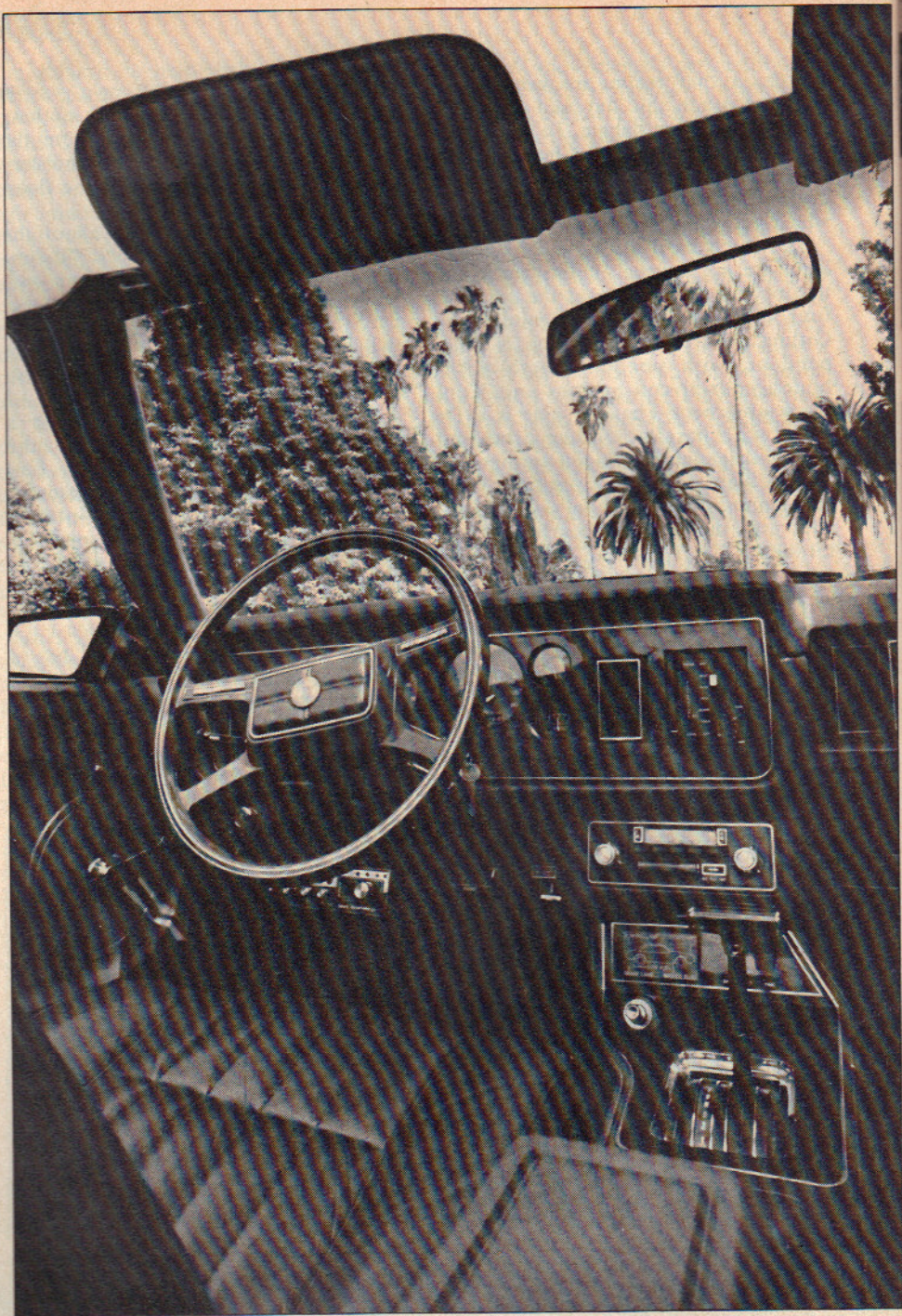
"A Capri," was the answer, but from the unchanged expression it was easy to tell that it didn't fully register with the parking garage voice.

"A what?"

"A Mercury Capri made into a convertible." This brought a slow look of recognition as the bit of information was absorbed, followed by a shout of, "It's beautiful," as the white car moved on down the boulevard, where within two blocks the same exchange was repeated, this time with the driver of a Toyota who hung out his window throughout a left-turn maneuver.

Who would ever have thought that in car-crazy Southern California a fairly low-key American compact car could generate enough interest to empty businesses of employees and customers simply by being parked, and could cause near accidents on the road as drivers diced for position to get a better look. A better look at a Capri?

But this car does that, all that and more. It would be easy to prove that this little 2-passenger convertible causes whiplash in both motorists and pedestrians reacting to their first glimpse of it. Passengers in cars traveling in front of it suddenly turn to the rear as the driver tells them what he's seen in his rear-view mirror. People on sidewalks stop and turn to follow the progress of the vehicle as it passes. Elderly women walking their dogs—women who may not have driven in a decade—stop to stare at the car, undoubtedly not know-

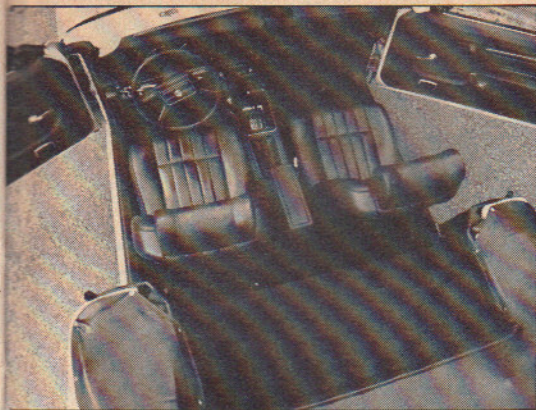


ing what it is but knowing that they've never seen one before, that it's somehow special. This little white car commands the attention that would be accorded a Ferrari stopping for gas in a small town. But this is Car-Crazy Los Angeles/Hollywood/Beverly Hills, where seeing a Ferrari is at least a daily occurrence, where Mercedes are as common as Mustangs, and where there are at least six times as many Rolls as catering trucks. This little Capri is a phenomenon. If it were a '55 Chevy with the top chopped six inches, a flamed paint job and a supercharger growing out of a hole in the hood, it would attract about the same amount of attention, but some of it would be derisive. Not so with this Capri. At this stage in its life, being the first and only

one anybody has ever seen, there are no negative comments. It sounds impossible, but in theory this appears to be a car *everybody* likes.

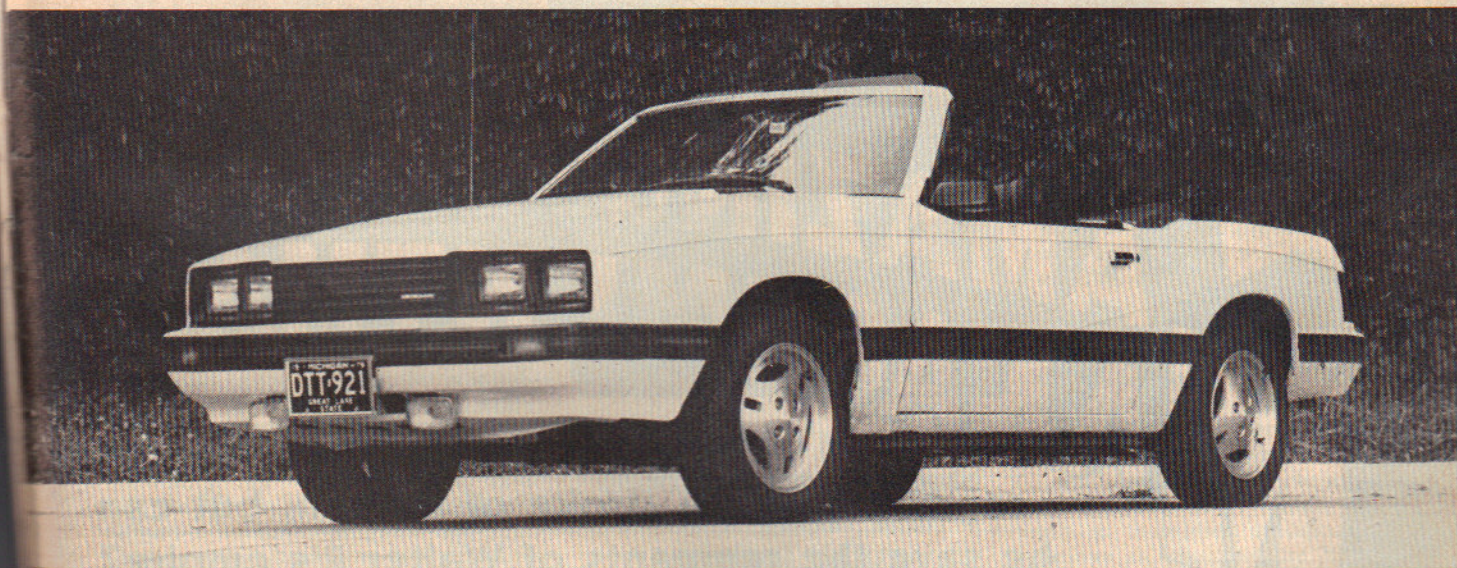
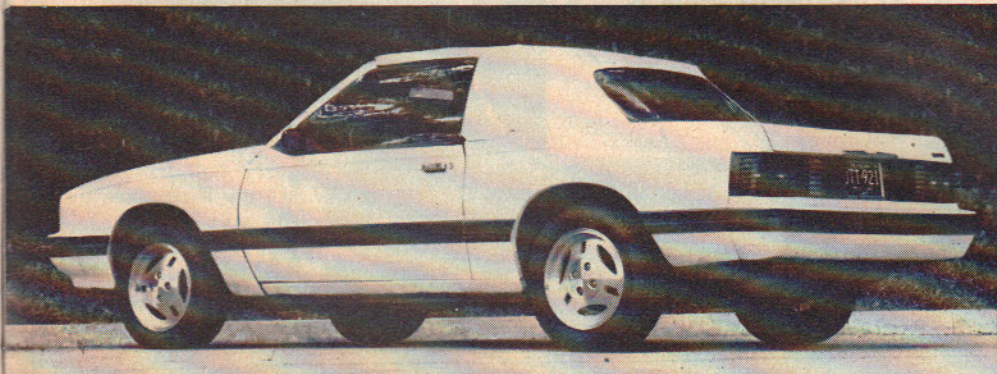
And why not? It's an obvious copy of another car that everybody likes. Andy Hotton, the builder, simply has been smart enough to combine the right two vehicles in a manner that is tasteful enough, so that no one really cares that the car is borderline to being a blatant ripoff. Everyone knows it looks like a Mercedes, yet they also know it's not one. But no one cares. The car has too much class and character of its own for people even to consider badmouthing it.

Hotton is a limo builder and former Ford employee. As AHA Manufacturing Company Limited, he has produced stretched versions of Buicks, Cadillacs,



tooled specifically for the Capri.

Getting curious about the price? The conversion costs \$8000. That is, you buy a Capri from a participating Lincoln-Mercury dealer, with any options you want, and the dealer will have AHA make it into a convertible for the additional \$8000. That brings the total cost of the car into the \$13,000-\$15,000 range, depending on how you order your original Capri. And that's about \$20,000 cheaper than a 450SL. You must also realize that Capris are no longer being built with trunks—only hatchbacks (although Mustang has a trunk version)—which will help you ap-



Chryslers, Lincolns and Volvos—more than 1000 examples of those long cars that make you wonder who is riding in back and why them and not you. For his convertible Capri, he simply has taken a car that Ford designed to capitalize on Mercedes' popularity (and the Capri/Mustang are just two of many attempting the same rub-off) and massaged it to an obvious conclusion. Measuring a 450SL, he found it to be very nearly the same dimensionally as a Capri. The fact that he uses a Mercedes trunk lid and that it looks right at home on his convertible is testimony to the similarity of the two cars. Even the top bows, linkage and hardware on this prototype are from a Mercedes, modified for the Capri. Production vehicles will get a version of this modified top

precipitate the bodywork involved.

But a Capri isn't half the car that a 450SL is, you say? True, without question. Still, how many people ever enjoy a Mercedes for what it really is: a sophisticated, amazingly agile sport/touring car that is over-engineered in the finest German tradition? Most Mercedes (and most of them are here in L.A.) are used just to putt around town for work, shopping and home. They're rarely put into a 4-wheel drift or braked hard at high speed. At 55 mph on our straight, smooth freeways, their 4-wheel independent suspension could as well be buggy springs and straight axles. In the end, most are bought for ego fulfillment, and the convertible Capri offers more of that for less than half the cost of the Mercedes.

How does the Capri drive and handle? Like a Capri. Which is to say as well as whatever optional suspension you choose, for, after all, mechanically it is just a stock Capri with a custom body. It is the 1970s' version of the coachbuilt Packard, Duesenberg and Stutz of the '20s and '30s. The unitized floor pan has been reinforced under the door sills, front to rear, to keep the car from flexing without the added support of the roof structure. The engine compartment is fitted with a semi-triangular bracework for the purpose. And the results are excellent. The doors close solidly and easily, like a stocker, and there's never a hint of noise from body panel contact.

The one thing the car does miss from the removal of the roof is some of its torsional rigidity—that resistance to the kind of twisting a car encounters as it angles up a driveway. Not that driveways affect the Capri in the slightest. You only notice the effect when you encounter a piece of rough road or a series of ripples in the pavement; the wheel and tire rebound in a slightly less controlled manner, introducing a shudder that is slightly more exaggerated than that in a stock Capri. But it's far from bothersome, the kind of reaction

that could be improved with different rate springs or shock valving. Anyway, these cars won't be bought for driving on dirt roads; they'll be cared for because of the amount of money they're going to be worth in 20 years.

Fewer than 500 of the convertibles will be built—at three facilities in the U.S. and one in Canada—just enough to stay under the limit that would bring the vehicles under increased federal control, requiring additional certification and added expense. The 500-unit limit also should help the cars retain a lot of the startling effect they have on anyone who sees them. And that's the real fun of this particular car. Hotton has named it *Lomismo*, Spanish for "same as." We're sure you don't need to have that explained. 