

Mystery Cars (Series 1)

12 X 30 MINUTES

EPISODIC BREAKDOWN

1. 1956 Buick Centurion, 1954 Plymouth Explorer

The 1956 Buick Centurion was designed to show that General Motors could keep pace with the zeitgeist of the times, air travel. This car looks like it could fly! While GM was looking upwards, Chrysler looked across the ocean. Designed with Italian car maker Ghia, the Plymouth Explorer is an example of the best of American and European styling.

2. 1953 GM XP-21 Firebird, 1955 Mercury D-528 Beldone

The 1953 GM XP-21 Firebird was the first gas turbine car, inspired by the much-admired and new technology of aircraft. Entirely unsubtle, it was truly a jet plane on wheels, and proved General Motors could reach far outside the box. But not every concept car was meant to leave the research lab. The 1955 Mercury D-528 Beldone was never even given a proper name, and lived a life of being poked and prodded like a laboratory rat.

3. 1953 Ford X-100, 1963 Chrysler Turbine

Ford celebrated its 50th birthday in real design style with the 1953 Ford X-100 prototype, with its tinted sun visors and arrays of switches and levers that felt more like an aeroplane cockpit than a car. Dizzy with the new world of air and space travel, even seeing the 1963 Chrysler Turbine glide down the street was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Only three exist today!

4. 1959 Cadillac Cyclone, 1977 Buick Phantom

At the end of the 1950's, GM's legendary designer Harley Earl created a concept car that hit the right note, at the right time, striking a design balance between space travel and aircraft that could capture the imagination of any aspiring cosmonaut: the 1959 Cadillac Cyclone XP-74.

5. 1956 GM Firebird II, 1953 Cadillac Series 62 Coupe by Ghia

In 1956 the convergence of beautiful new highways, the idealization of suburban commuter lifestyle, and aircraft technology inspired General Motors to create the Firebird II. By 1953, European styling dominated North American fashion trends from clothing to hairstyles to car design; Cadillac capitalized on this trend by creating a car that was apple pie on the outside, but sheer Italian on the inside: the Cadillac Series 62 Coupe by Ghia.

6. 1962 Ford Mustang Prototype, 1959 GM Firebird III

In 1962, Ford gave birth to an American icon, the Ford Mustang prototype. But back in 1959, it was the GM Firebird III, the third addition of GM's famed, turbine powered concept trilogy that was the 'big thing', and the expectations were astronomical. Loaded down with new technologies, the much-anticipated Firebird III lived up to the hype.

7. 1954 Buick Wildcat II, 1938 Buick Y-Job

The 1954 Buick Wildcat II was General Motor's answer to Chevrolet's Corvette: it looked like a Corvette, and was all about performance. Meanwhile, the name 'Y-Job' was inspired by the aircraft industry, which used the Y-Designation for its most advanced work. Take one look at this car and it's easy to see that it was head and shoulders above what was being built in 1938.

8. 1951 GM XP-300, 1951 GM Le Sabre

After weathering the Great Depression and World War II, this long, luxurious concept car was a sight for sore eyes. But beyond its creamy white curves, the Buick XP-300 hid a bounty of excessive peacetime engineering. But if ever there were a car from the future – the 1951 Le Sabre was it: specialty metals like magnesium and aluminium, 325 horsepower and capable of running on gasoline or alcohol.

9. 1953 GM Futurliner Bus, 1963 Ford Thunderbird 'Italien'

The 33 foot 1953 GM Futurliner Bus was a brilliant marketing tool: it was disguised as educating the consumer about exciting new products like microwaves and automatic transmissions. Ford's Thunderbird line had been in production for 8 years; already popularising the 'Personal Luxury Car' market, but this 1963 T-Bird made a splash by putting a new twist on an old flame, capitalizing on America's love affair with all things Italian.

10. 1953 Alfa Romeo B.A.T. 5 and the 1954 Dodge Fire Arrow II

In 1953, the Alfa Romeo B.A.T. 5 was unleashed onto the unsuspecting public. The collaboration between Italian coachbuilder Bertone, responsible for this sensational design, and Franco Scaglione, one of the most influential Italian automotive designers of all time. Meanwhile, Chrysler captured the spirit of the American/Italian design at the precise moment that European trendsetters were dictating what America wears and how they look.

11. 1954 Alfa Romeo B.A.T 7, 1954 Dodge Fire Arrow IV

The 1954 Alfa Romeo B.A.T 7 has its roots in aerodynamics, the wings at the back very much like a flying bat. This prototype was a styling and design exercise of coach company Bertoni, and built on the Alfa Romeo chassis. America's passion Italiana extended to Chrysler with the 1954 Dodge Fire Arrow IV; its luscious body was hand crafted by Italian coach builder Ghia.

12. 1955 Alfa Romeo B.A.T. 9, 1955 Dodge Fire Bomb

This sleek spectacle of the 1955 Alfa Romeo B.A.T. 9 captured the essence and the wonder of the 1950's fascination with the space race. By 1955, transatlantic collaborations were commonplace, and the automotive industry is right in the mix, with the creation of the 1955 Dodge Firebomb: its body was sheer Ghia from Turin, Italy, and the engine and chassis was all Chrysler.