

TIPS ON BUYING A THUNDERBIRD

Because Classic Thunderbirds are almost 25 years old now, it gets difficult to tell a good one from a bad one. An unrestored car is bound to be run down but could be a very good buy. The single most important element is the body. Everything else can be restored to its original condition with comparative ease and little expense. Either rust or collision damage can relegate an otherwise "show" car to "driver" status. Therefore this article will deal with determining the condition of the body.

First get the car out where it can be seen. A car stuffed into a dusty garage with boxes stacked around it is in no position to be evaluated. Once the car is out in the light step way back from it for an overall look. View it from both sides and front and back from a distance. Spring sag is most noticeable at this distance but that has little to do with the body itself. Check the line made by the bottom of the front fender, the rocker panel, and the dog leg (just in front of the rear wheel well). This line should be absolutely straight. If it's not check for rocker panel replacement or front fender damage. Next get up close and with both doors, the hood, and trunk closed check the seams around each of these. The more consistent the lines the better the car. Check the door jams front and rear for welds. Fenders were attached at the factory with spot welds but replacements are usually put on with a torch which leaves a "puddle" of weld at each weld point. Look inside the trunk especially at the back of the panel between the tail lights and where it joins the floor pan. This will show signs of any rear end accident the car may have had. Also check the inside of the rear quarter panels at same time. These should be sound proofing material over a major portion of the panel. It is rarely replaced when body work is done. Under the hood look for signs of work on either side of the radiator support near where the inner fender panels attach. Also check for rust in the inner fenders behind the battery and the heater. Dirt collects on top of the fresh air ducts that run under the fenders. The dirt then holds moisture and eventually rusts the inner fenders. This is where the outer fender and inner fenders are spot welded together. This is where the hood bumpers will be on '56 and '57's. If a front fender has been replaced there will be weld "puddles" or pop rivets where the spot welds should be. Check the underside of the hood for signs of work. Overlook the dents along the superstructure between the two hood pins. These were done at the factory to make the hood curve the same as the cowl. Look for places just up from the hood hinges where the hood may have been bent. Check the "bead" around the front wheel well opening. This is where the front fender flairs out and then rolls under. The flair and the roll should be smooth and consistent. This is one of the most difficult places to fix on the entire car. Take the skirts off and check the same place on the rear wheel opening. While there is no flair or roll the opening should have the same amount of "sharpness" where the metal bends from the side of the fender into the wheel opening. The screw heads that hold the skirt brackets should be visible and distinct. There two right angle yabs spot welded in the wheel opening lip to retain the skirt. Next replace the skirt and check the seam, again there should be the same width all the way around. Look under the car at the inner rocker panel and floor braces. If the car is heavily undercoated chip some away with a sharp screw driver. Rust in this part of the car is very hard to repair in way that won't show. Look at the underside of the rocker panels themselves, there should be drain holes along the bottom. If there are none, suspect replacement. With the skirts off again feel the inner rear fender panels. Start behind the dog leg and go up over the top and down the back side. Any rust holes found here will indicate that the outside has been rusty but repaired. Check for rust in the inner panel behind the rear wheel. There should be two drain plugs in the inner panel but the rest should be straight and flat all the way back to the rear of the fender except for a small dish at the extreme rear to provide

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Exhaust tip clearance. Check the bottom of the doors where the weatherstrip attaches and the inside of the trunk at the very back. Both of these places are subject to rust if water has been allowed to collect inside. Sight down the sides of the car from the front and back. The slight waves and body irregularities are to be expected but poor body work will show up by this method. Pay particular attention to the groove which starts at the hash mark and runs down the door and on the rear quarter panel. This groove should be crisp and straight along its entire run. The groove should line up properly between the door and the front and rear fenders. On 56's and 57's look inside the cowl vent for signs of body work. Next check under the lip that is at the top of the grill. Feel along the underside of the lip any gross irregularities. Near both sides of the opening there lead joints that two body panels together and there will be somewhat rough from the factory. Check under the deck behind the seat. Old air conditioners and some radio speakers were installed through that panel. A repair job over that expanse of flat surface is very difficult. Also on the underside of that same panel there are welds that join it to some upright supports near the side very close to the rear wheel housing. These welds often come loose and can cause a squeak that is difficult to find. They can be re-welded with little trouble. Check the way the headlight doors and tail-light housings fit to the fenders, but don't expect much from the headlight doors.

Once these specific checks have been made, common sense must guide you in your decision to buy or not. Any 25 year old car is bound to have some body problems and this article was written to make you aware of them before you buy the car. The final decision should be made weighing three factors: Price, Condition, and what plans you have for the car. Emotion unfortunately plays a big part in buying a Thunderbird. Often it is well to ask another club member his opinion of the car in an effort to overcome the emotion element.

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