



CAR and DRIVER ROAD TEST

AMX 390

If AMC had done something as bright as the AMX five years ago, they'd be in a lot better shape today.



PHOTOGRAPHY: PETE BIRO

This is no Rambler, you guys. It is—to quote a sensitive and eloquent artist-friend from the West Coast—“one son-of-a-bitch motorcar!” It's handsome as all get-out. It's fast, stable, safe, and thoroughly enjoyable to drive. It's the first American Motors car in recorded history that every enthusiast can own with pride and drive with pleasure.

The mechanics of how it got that way are easy. Everybody knows that you can take a 2-seater coupe with a 97-in. wheelbase, give it a good power-to-weight ratio, add decent brakes, steering, and suspension, and wind up with a very acceptable sports car. However, in spite of the fact that everybody seems to know it, hardly anybody ever builds one that way. And the last outfit in the world you'd have expected it from was stodgy old dumb-cars-for-

dumb-people American Motors. . . . Right?

Well, for a start, it doesn't seem to be stodgy old dumb-cars-for-dumb-people American Motors anymore. Attending the press preview of the AMX gave the observer a nice, warm feeling that maybe the gentlemen from Kenosha have turned a philosophical corner. Listening to their executives and engineers talk, reading the comprehensive technical material they'd prepared for the introduction, driving their new sports machine, it began to look as though American Motors had stopped holding its pants up with both belt and suspenders and quit wearing Mason Velvet-Eze shoes. *American Motors might be starting to swing!*

They actually didn't break any new ground, either with their car or their prepared remarks. But they *did* make one

believe that they had a clearer view of their role in the car business than ever before—certainly within the last 10 years—and that they were finally beginning to break out of the fumbling, reactionary malaise that's hampered their movements and clouded their thinking for so long. If American Motors makes it, the AMX won't be what does it, but the change in attitude that made the AMX possible is just what the doctor ordered.

The idea of a first-class American-style GT coupe from American Motors is pretty revolutionary, but in one sense it represents a return to a traditional—and viable—AMC position, that of supplying low-volume cars to suit the demands of special markets ordinarily ignored by the other big manufacturers. The AMX is only scheduled for production of between 10- and 20,000

Fast, stable and safe, the "hairy little brother to the Javelin" is the first AMC car in recorded history that every enthusiast can own with pride and drive with pleasure.

units per year, but American Motors can make a fair chunk of money on that kind of volume—and all they really need to do to survive is make money. They don't have to be as big as General Motors.

AMC Group Vice President Vic Raviolo called the AMX "a Walter Mitty Ferrari," and it probably is. AMC styling chief Dick Teague called it "a hairy little brother to the Javelin," and it's probably that too. But it's more. They no doubt feel compelled to say things like that to help identify their new product and locate it within the complicated structure of the automobile market, but the fact is that it will stand on its own merit. It's good enough to become the sort of car by which other cars are judged.

Every car is a "Walter Mitty Ferrari." And the Javelin is a nice enough version of the ubiquitous pony-car, but that's *all* it is, truthfully. The AMX, on the other hand, is good enough and unusual enough to do the real job, the big job, that AMC hopes it will do. They want it to sell well, certainly. They want to make money on it, of course. But what they're really banking on . . . the main reason that they built a car like this at all . . . is the hope that it will start to change the public's mind about their company. If it can do that, it can buy them the time they need to create a whole new line of products, designed—like the AMX—to seek out and exploit limited but potentially profitable segments of the American car market where the competi-

tion is either weak or dozing.

So the AMX is more than just a sports coupe, it's sort of an advertising campaign. But if it's going to succeed at the latter occupation, it'll have to be pretty good at the former, so we examined it from that standpoint—we tried to imagine all the other sports and GT cars we'd known over the years, and mentally put them through the same kind of enthusiast's spot-check we gave the AMX for comparison.

We weren't able to give the car a full road test, since announcement-time was still three months away and they didn't want any on the public roads. Instead, we drove three first-run production models on an improvised road circuit at the Orange County International Raceway (an improvised circuit, but one that may very well become a commercial reality), and spent a day climbing in and out, opening and closing things, and generally flogging hell out of them on the twisty little road course and the super Orange County drag strip.

The three we drove were all fitted with AMC's new 390 cu. in., 315-horsepower V-8 engine, and two had Borg-Warner automatic transmissions while the third featured a B-W 4-speed manual. A heavy-duty suspension package is standard with the 390 engine, and all three cars had limited-slip differentials. Two had AMC's optional manual steering (19.3 overall ratio, 4.0 turns lock-to-lock) and one had

power-assisted (18.1 overall, 3.8 turns). On the whole, we preferred the car with automatic transmission and manual steering.

You won't be able to buy an AMX with a 6-cylinder engine, which will undoubtedly horrify all those hundreds of AMC dealers who haven't yet and probably never will get the message. Instead, it's being offered with a choice of their three V-8s: the 290 (225 hp @ 4700 rpm) is standard, the 343 (280 hp @ 4800 rpm) is the middle option, and the 390 is the top of the line. The 390 is definitely the one for all right-thinking American boys. With automatic, it propelled us through the quarter-mile at a brisk 14.80 ET and 95.03 mph terminal speed, and that was the first 15 seconds or 1320 feet we'd ever driven the little dear. We were shifting manually—holding it in gear—which led us to bounce the valves at 5200 rpm, but we *still* managed that respectable performance. Other editors with more straight-line experience were getting down into the lower 14s and the higher 90s with relative ease. It's a quick car.

With that blast off the line as our introduction to the AMX, we really didn't have much chance to evaluate it until we were approaching the end of the strip at a speed which—if unknown, in the truly scientific sense—was at least clear off the end of the 120 mph speedometer. At this speed, we discovered that we were bouncing the valves again, and we also discovered that wind noise at the side windows was very similar to what you might get if you were a wing-walker in an air show.

It was an extremely windy day, and although this may have contributed materially to the really overwhelming wind noise, it didn't seem to affect the car's straight-line stability one whit. At the end of the strip, just past a fully-manned ambulance that was probably parked there as a psychological deterrent, was a very tight left-hander. This we took too slowly and on the wrong line. Then, annoyed with our desultory performance so far, we got steam up and charged like a maniac through the wiggly bits that led back to the start. The car really behaved very well through all this sadistic misuse, and on the next lap—when we'd learned the way around the test circuit and were behaving a little better—it went like gangbusters.

The engine is responsive, up to its somewhat low rev limit of 5200 or so, and the Borg-Warner automatic box is much more flexible and useful than we'd ever have believed possible. It's still not as quick or



A handsome 2-seater with American-style acceleration and European-style handling, it's good enough to become the sort of car by which other cars are judged.

crisp as, say, a 3-speed Turbo Hydra-Matic, but people like Jaguar and Aston Martin could profit by finding out what AMC did to the old slug.

The 4-speed manual is, unfortunately, a different kettle of fish. The gear ratios are all right, and the clutch works as well as most, but the shift linkage is an abomination. It is a long, wobbly business with lots of play in every direction, and it gives one the feeling that he might have to get up from the driver's seat and move to the other side of the car to get the lever from second to third. It has a distinctly vintage Arnolt Bristol feel about it that is none too swift. We would recommend an immediate switch to Hurst linkage, no matter what it might cost, because the present system simply negates any of the advantages—real or imagined—of having a 4-speed manual in the first place.

It's hard to come up with the name of a genuine GT car that might be comparable to the AMX. It's less expensive and less sophisticated than the latest Corvettes with IRS, but it's infinitely superior to the old solid-axle jobs in both ride and road-holding. It looks too American (but good, but good), and its acceleration and top speed are too great to compare it to any similarly-priced European sports car. It's really sort of all alone in a class of "*pur sang*" 2-seaters costing less than \$3500, with American-style power and European-style handling and ride." A NASCAR-style Fiat Dino, maybe?

Anyway, it gets the job done. It's a car that wants some driving. It'll rump-rump along like any tough American sporty car in traffic or on the turnpike, but unlike most American cars, it really seems to enjoy being hazed over nasty little roads with lots of places for heavy braking, full throttle acceleration, and great savings on the old steering wheel.

The brakes are quite good, and we only know of two complaints in that area—one lad who was driving a bit too hard claimed that he was getting some braking hop at the rear, and we spun one of the cars making a hands-off, maximum-effort stop. However, with both hands on the wheel, and driving within the limits of sanity and sweet reason, we found the brakes to be more than powerful enough to match the car's potential, and generally well-behaved.

The steering was good with both the optional "quicker" manual and the quicker-still power-assisted. We opted for the manual because it seemed quite quick enough, and at the same time featured remarkably low effort. Another notable feature was an absence of any really severe caster-return or kickback, unlike most of the American sporty cars when so-equipped.

The car's interior is nice. For some reason, tightening up the interior dimensions and getting rid of the rear seat seem to make it sportier and more attractive than the Javelin, even though it shares most of its major components with its pony-car

brother. The seats are comfortable, and they have the AMC recliner mechanism, which is a very real benefit. We found them easy to adjust to our requirements, and we liked the authentic leathery feel of the vinyl upholstery.

The steering wheel is a little too high for most purist's tastes, and we'd have welcomed the addition of AMC's optional "Adjust-o-Tilt" (can you *believe* that name?) steering wheel. The wheel itself was a sporty device wrapped in leather, or vinyl, or something, and it was just the sort of thing you'd want for altering the course of the front wheels.

Adding to the interior's overall impression of quality, we thought, was the fact that it's fully carpeted all the way from the firewall to the rear window.

The trunk is not what you'd call huge, but it's ample for small- to medium-sized articles that you might prefer to have under lock and key. The real luggage space is behind the seats, and it's more than ample for two passenger's normal requirements on any typical automotive journey.

The trunk also contains an inflatable B.F. Goodrich mini-spare, which is a good idea because the usual full-sized spare tire would have either been forced inside with the passengers—due to the sharply limited trunk space—or Mr. Teague and his styling boffins would have had to come up with a continental kit. The concept of the

(Text continued on page 88; Specifications overleaf)



AMX 390

Manufacturer: American Motors Corporation
14250 Plymouth Road
Detroit, Michigan 48232

Vehicle type: Front-engine, rear-wheel-drive,
2-passenger sport coupe

Price as tested: \$N.A.
(Price for the AMX 390 had not been released
by American Motors Corporation at press time.)

ENGINE

Type: water-cooled V-8, cast iron block and
heads, 5 main bearings
Bore x stroke 4.17 x 3.57 in, 106.0 x 90.6 mm
Displacement 390 cu in, 6392 cc
Compression ratio 10.2 to one
Carburetion 1 x 4 bbl Carter
Valve gear Pushrod-operated, overhead
valves, hydraulic lifters
Power (SAE) 315 bhp @ 4600 rpm
Torque (SAE) 425 lbs/ft @ 3200 rpm
Specific power output 0.81 bhp/cu in,
49.4 bhp/liter
Max. recommended engine speed 5000 rpm

DRIVE TRAIN

Transmission 3-speed automatic
Max. torque converter ratio 2.0 to one
Final drive ratio 3.15 to one

| Gear | Ratio | Mph/1000 rpm | Max. test speed |
|------|-------|--------------|--------------------|
| I | 2.40 | 9.8 | 51 mph (5200 rpm) |
| II | 1.47 | 15.9 | 83 mph (5200 rpm) |
| III | 1.00 | 23.5 | 122 mph (5200 rpm) |

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase 97.0 in
Track F: 58.4 in, R: 57.0 in
Length 177.2 in
Width 71.6 in
Height 51.7 in
Ground clearance 5.5 in
Curb weight 3205 lbs
Test weight 3410 lbs
Weight distribution, F/R 57.1/42.7%
Lbs/bhp (test weight) 10.8
Battery capacity 12 volts, 50 amp/hr
Alternator capacity 420 watts
Fuel capacity 19 gal
Oil capacity 4 qts
Water capacity 14 qts

SUSPENSION

F: Ind., unequal-length wishbones, coil
springs, anti-sway bar
R: Rigid axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs,
torque-struts

STEERING

Type Recirculating ball
Turns lock-to-lock 4.0
Turning circle 33.5 ft

BRAKES

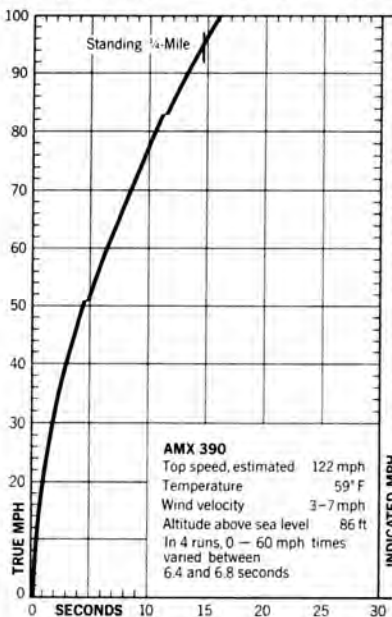
F: 11.2-in solid disc
R: 10.0 x 1.75-in cast iron drum
Swept area 371 sq in

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size and type: 14 x 5.5-in, stamped
steel, 5-bolt
Tire make, size and type Goodyear E70-14,
fiberglass belted, tubeless
Test inflation pressures F: 24 psi, R: 24 psi
Tire load rating 1190 lbs per tire @ 24 psi

PERFORMANCE

| Zero to | Seconds |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| 30 mph | 1.9 |
| 40 mph | 3.1 |
| 50 mph | 4.5 |
| 60 mph | 6.6 |
| 70 mph | 8.5 |
| 80 mph | 10.7 |
| 90 mph | 13.5 |
| 100 mph | 16.3 |
| Standing 1/4-mile | 14.8 sec @ 95.0 mph |



CHECK LIST

ENGINE

Starting Good
Response Good
Vibration Good
Noise Good

DRIVE TRAIN

Shift linkage Very Good
Shift smoothness Very Good
Drive train noise Very Good

STEERING

Effort Good
Response Good
Road feel Very Good
Kickback Very Good

SUSPENSION

Ride comfort Fair
Roll resistance Very Good
Pitch control Good
Harshness control Fair

HANDLING

Directional control Excellent
Predictability Excellent
Evasive maneuverability Very Good
Resistance to sidewinds Excellent

BRAKES

Pedal pressure Good
Response Very Good
Fade resistance Very Good
Directional stability Fair

CONTROLS

Wheel position Fair
Pedal position Good
Gearshift position Good
Relationship Very Good
Small controls Good

INTERIOR

Ease of entry/exit Very Good
Noise level (cruising) Poor
Front seating comfort Very Good
Front leg room Very Good
Front head room Very Good
Front hip/shoulder room Very Good
Rear seating comfort —
Rear leg room —
Rear head room —
Rear hip/shoulder room —
Instrument comprehensiveness Fair
Instrument legibility Fair

VISION

Forward Very Good
Front quarter Very Good
Side Very Good
Rear quarter Fair
Rear Fair

WEATHER PROTECTION

Heater/defroster Fair
Ventilation Poor
Air conditioner —
Weather sealing Fair

CONSTRUCTION QUALITY

Sheet metal Good
Paint Good
Chrome Good
Upholstery Fair
Padding Fair
Hardware Very Good

GENERAL

Headlight illumination Very Good
Parking and signal lights Very Good
Wiper effectiveness Excellent
Service accessibility Very Good
Trunk space Poor
Interior storage space Excellent
Bumper protection Very Good



the Z-28 Camaro has appeared with its fresh approach to the problem, and it would seem that American Motors could have done something a little more unusual with the AMX. As a total car, however, the AMX looks fine. It's a well-integrated design, and it's clean.

Judging from the sales of Corvettes, Triumphs, MGs, Jaguars, etc., we'd guess that there is a market for a car like the AMX in this country. The only question, really, is whether or not there's a market for any kind of a car from American Motors. Every representative of AMC management who spoke at the AMX preview touched on the need for an image change, and how this car and the Javelin had been produced for that express purpose.

They're all pretty bullish about the immediate future though, vowing to be in the black in 1968, and telling tales of growing sales success with the Javelin and the Ambassador, though volunteering very little information about the sales of the Rebel and the American.

In spite of everything though, it was encouraging. It looks like a braver, healthier company than it did a few months ago. The AMX helps that impression, but even more reassuring is the feeling that—in having a go at the AMX—they'd finally done something that had a ring of confidence and style about it. Their top guy, Roy Chapin, has done a terrific job as a national spokesman for the company, in some ways doing with words and gestures what they're all hoping the AMX will do with neat styling and 14-second quarter-miles.

Group vice president Vic Raviolo is a different kind of reassuring factor. In a company traditionally staffed by the nicest, dullest, most invisible un-persons in the automobile business, Vic Raviolo is a tough guy. He has pale blonde hair and bifocal glasses, but he is built like a No. 4 Chapman Valve Fire Hydrant and you wouldn't want to go more than maybe a couple of rounds with him unless you were very fast and had hands like concrete watermelons.

He growls that there are too many nice guys at American Motors, and he says that based on his experience and knowledge of the competition in the automobile business nice guys will be lucky to finish last—that they are more apt not to finish at all. And you get the feeling that he is likely to have a couple of nice guys on pumpernickel for an afternoon snack.

When he says things like this, you're glad you're not some poor dim-bulb Rambler dealer who has just ordered a dozen 6-cylinder Javelins with air conditioning and no radios. But at the same time, you figure that maybe if American Motors had done something as bright as the AMX five years ago, and maybe if they'd gone out and hired a couple of other guys who talk tough and look like police inspectors, they'd be in a lot better shape today. But we're betting that they'll be in better shape this time next year. ●



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