



10 BEST CARS FOR A CHANGED WORLD

1978

PHOTOS BY JOHN LAMM
& JOE RUSZ

TIMES CHANGE. PEOPLE change. Priorities change. Cars change. That in a few words is the rationale behind this list of Ten Best Cars. The last time the R&T editorial staff thought the time was right for selecting a Best Cars list was exactly three years ago. And before then you have to go back to August 1971—nearly seven years ago—for the first time the R&T staff officially put together a Best list. That in itself should tell you something about the way we approach a Ten Best Cars selection.

Frankly, we don't believe enough progress occurs every year to merit an annual voting. And as more and more automakers have come to the realization that change simply for the sake of change is illogical and irrational, that yearly madness, the annual model change, is becoming less and less a part of the automotive scene. True, we still have that characteristically American phenomenon of "last year's eggcrate grille being replaced by this year's all-new vertical bar design," but there's less of the wholesale styling redesign that used to accompany the domestic automaker's new model introductions in the fall.

Part of this is because the automakers, here and abroad, have been so busy just trying to stay abreast of government safety and emissions regulations that they've not had the time, the manpower nor the money to pump into frivolous styling exercises. The key word today in car design is relevance. Today's car buyer is much more sophisticated than his counterpart of seven or even three years ago. And the automakers realize that although looks are still very important, a car is going to have a tough time surviving in today's highly competitive market place if it doesn't pass some important tests. Does it offer value for the dollar? Does

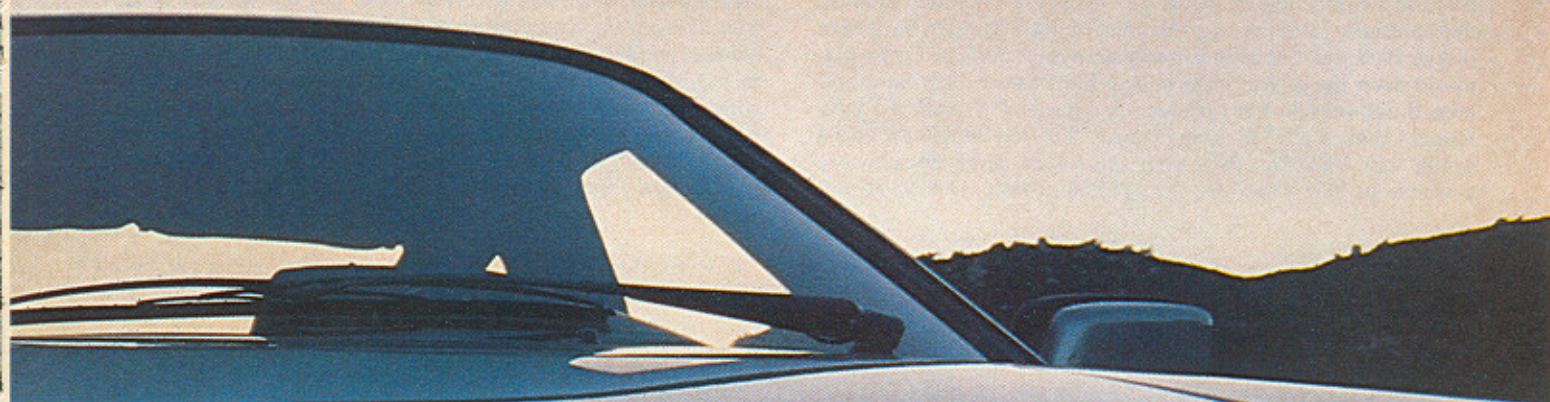
it have good resale? Is it durable and reliable? Is it a safe car? Will it rust out in one midwestern winter? Does it get good fuel economy?

The changes that have occurred in the world since 1971 are staggering. Seven years ago hardly anyone worried about emission controls, catalytic converters, safety bumpers, fuel economy, oil embargoes, petroleum shortages or the declining value of the dollar. Looking back you might say that, compared to the state of affairs in the world today, 1971 was Pollyanna's world.

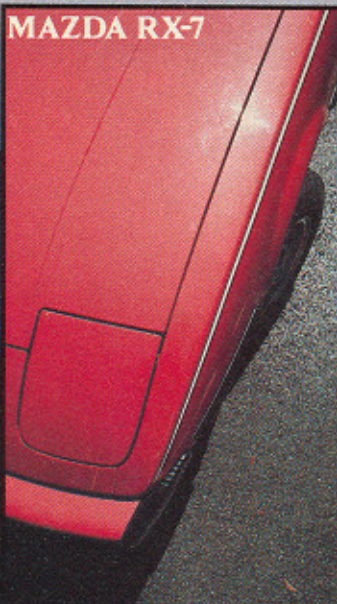
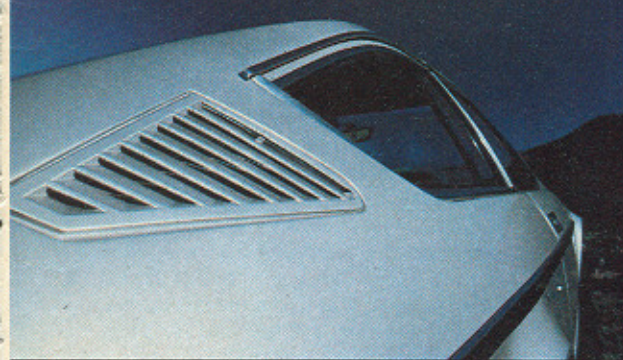
Our 1975 Ten Best Cars list reflected the realities of a world very much in transition. We were just beginning to comprehend the enormous impact of the oil embargo and the reality that petroleum reserves are finite. We were learning to cope with a 55-mph national speed limit and the rapidly dwindling buying power of the U.S. dollar. In choosing Ten Best Cars for a Changing World, a restructuring of priorities was called for. This didn't cause much problem at R&T because historically we've preached the gospel of small, lightweight, efficient cars. But greater emphasis was placed on small size, efficient use of space and high fuel economy than in our 1971 choices.

During the past three years we've watched the government mandate even more restrictive exhaust emission regulations and issue a fuel economy edict calling for a corporate average fuel economy of 27.5 mpg by 1984.

In 1975 the average car owner would probably have told you that diesels were bought by rich old eccentrics who liked to drive very slowly. Today the diesel is offered in Everyman's car, the VW Rabbit, and even Detroit has gotten into the act. Mention ➤



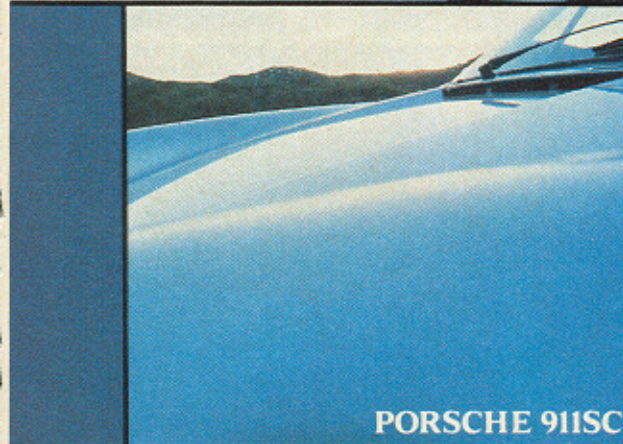
ALFA ROMEO SPRINT VELOCE



MAZDA RX-7



BMW 733i



PORSCHE 911SC



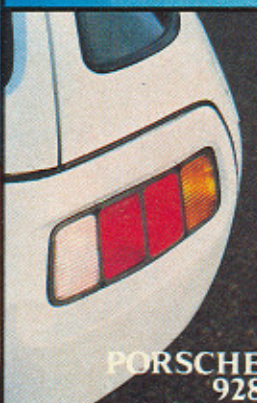
HONDA ACCORD



VOLKSWAGEN SCIROCCO



BMW 530i



PORSCHE 928



FORD FAIRMONT/
MERCURY ZEPHYR



AUDI 5000

turbocharging in 1975 and even most enthusiasts would have equated it with diesel trucks and circle-track USAC racers. (Porsche's turbocharged sports cars were just beginning to make their presence felt in racing.) Would you have thought back then that in 1978 you'd be able to purchase a legal Porsche Turbo that would cover the quarter mile in less than 14 sec or that Saab and even Buick would offer turbocharged models? Would you have thought back in 1975 that the Datsun 280Z you bought for \$6284 would cost \$8098 in 1978, that the lowest price Porsche 911 available in 1978 would list for \$17,950 or that the \$19,930 you

spent for a Mercedes-Benz 450SEL in 1975 would only purchase two-thirds of the 1978 model? During the past three years we've watched automakers around the world, but particularly in Detroit, revamp their product lines with leaner, trimmer and more efficient models. We've heard designers and engineers describe increased use of lightweight materials such as aluminum, high-strength low-alloy steel and advanced fiber composites to pare not just pounds but ounces. Yes, the world has truly changed. Changed enough that we thought it time to take a close look at how today's automobiles fit into this changed world.

Best Sedan Under \$5000

HONDA ACCORD



WE CALLED it the best buy in the U.S. when it was introduced in 1976. Primarily because of the decline in the value of the dollar compared to the yen these past two years, the price has risen appreciably. And because the car is in short supply, prospective buyers still face gouging from unscrupulous Honda dealers. But when all is said and done the Accord is still a damn fine automobile. It offers impressive value for the dollar and the unique CVCC stratified-charge engine means it doesn't need a catalyst and can run on less expensive regular leaded fuel. And it's a rare driver who will get less than 30 mpg in all-around driving. It scores high in such areas as outward vision, controls, styling, ventilation and finish and is so finely detailed and appointed most other automakers can't imagine how Honda can build such a high quality car for so little money. Although it has only two doors, it has a rear hatchback and a folding rear seat back for extra utility. We drove one for 48,000 miles and liked it as much the last day we had it as the first. All this and it's great fun to drive.

THIS IS a joint award because the Fairmont-Zephyr is for all intents and purposes the same car with minor detail changes to give it corporate division identity. No matter, because it's a very healthy sign of the changed attitude in Detroit toward car design. The F-Z represents the first of a new family of Ford cars designed with efficiency of space, fuel and materials foremost in mind. The shape of the 2- and 4-door sedans has a "designed in Europe look" with crisp lines and an expansive greenhouse for good all-around outward vision. The F-Z is impressively roomy inside, with more leg, head, shoulder and hip room than many much larger cars. And as a station wagon, a popular model in this market segment, it offers nearly the same carrying capacity as an intermediate-size wagon. The efficient design extends to the chassis where Ford engineers selected a hybrid MacPherson design up front to save weight and to allow for a more spacious engine compartment leading to improved accessibility. It also features rack-and-pinion steering—a first for domestic cars of this size. The F-Z doesn't

Best Sedan \$5000-\$7500

FORD FAIRMONT/ MERCURY ZEPHYR



ride or handle like any previous domestic-built Ford. The ride is firmer and better controlled and there's less of the excessive understeer for which American sedans are noted. Because of time, emissions and cost considerations, the F-Z doesn't have all the features an enthusi-

ast might feel are necessary. For example, you can't order a 4-speed gearbox with anything but the 2.3-liter 4-cylinder engine and the car needs better instrumentation. But these things are coming and will only serve to make an already fine car even better.

The Criteria

WE LIKE cars and we like driving. And just because a car is relevant to the times doesn't mean it has to be boring. We wouldn't be writing this magazine and you wouldn't be reading it if all we talked about were items of transportation. So driving pleasure is high on our list of priorities for a car making the Ten Best list. Obviously driving enjoyment is a subjective thing and in any discussion of driving pleasure it would be difficult if not impossible to get every R&T editor to agree to all the various

points that distinguish a car that's fun to drive from one that's simply transportation. We admit it, we all have our prejudices. However, these prejudices aren't based on ignorance but rather experience and exposure because every year each of us drives 40-60 different cars here and abroad. So while the staff might give you two or three different reasons why they liked or disliked the seats, instruments, steering wheel, etc in a given car, we're all in agreement that an enjoyable car is one that is responsive to the driver's commands and doesn't totally isolate him or her from the road and the outside world. →

PENNY-WISE and pound frugal is the way we described our Audi 5000 road test car. This model, a more luxurious up-market sedan than its 100LS predecessor (a class winner in 1975), adheres to all the principles for which Audis have always been noted: eminently logical, lightweight, airy feeling and innovative. How else could you describe a car of this size with the packaging advantages of front-wheel drive and the world's first 5-cylinder gasoline engine? The Audi 5000 will carry five passengers in quiet, luxurious comfort but it has a split personality and is equally at home on a twisty road where it provides an enthusiast with a great deal of driving entertainment. The 5-cylinder engine is surprisingly good with only a slightly rough note that is most noticeable at idle. The fuel-injected engine exhibits exemplary driveability characteristics and, when pushed hard, takes on a decidedly sporty note. The model we tested last December was equipped with a 3-speed automatic transmission that is adequate but not outstanding. Enthusiasts will prefer Audi's fine 4-speed manual gearbox and that version should

Best Luxury-Sports Sedan \$7500-\$11,000 **AUDI 5000**



return even better fuel economy than the automatic's 20.0 mpg. The 5000 is the most expensive Audi ever sold in the U.S.

but for the price it's head and shoulders above the competition. A real automotive bargain.



Best Luxury-Sports Sedan \$11,000-\$19,000 **BMW 530i**

THE BMW 530i is a repeater from our 1975 Ten Best selections. And for good reason. It's everything a luxury-sports sedan should be: handsome, comfortable, practical in the extreme, with an impressive blend and balance of performance, braking, ride, handling, steering and roadholding thrown in. The 530i is equipped with a fuel-injected 3-liter engine that continues as the most refined inline 6-cylinder in the world. By rejecting a catalytic converter approach to controlling exhaust emissions, the engine can run on leaded regular fuel. Conversely, fuel economy suffers a bit because the 530i's thermal reactor requires a richer mixture to burn pollutants efficiently. But 18-20 mpg for such a potent and luxurious sedan is quite respectable. Unique in this class of car is the choice of a 4-speed manual gearbox or automatic; all the 530i's competitors make do with 3-speed automatics. As we said back in June 1975, there's no need to look up the definition of "sports sedan" in the dictionary—just drive the 530i. It's not only the best sports sedan in its class but it may well be the best sports sedan in the world, regardless of price.

Other criteria are subjective and objective. We can measure things like acceleration, braking and fuel economy. Esthetics are in the eye of the beholder, but this enters into the selection. Design and engineering, practicality, space efficiency, reliability, durability, comfort, noise, ride, handling, luggage capacity, fit and finish—these are factors that we also considered.

Price, or more specifically, value for the dollar, is another important factor. If you find the various price jumps listed here rather shocking, you're not alone. In 1971 the lowest price category was for sedans costing less than \$2200. In 1975 that

category was for sedans under \$3500; for this selection that figure jumps to \$5000! A Porsche 911 cost \$6595 in 1971, \$11,750 in 1975 and lists for \$17,950 today. The under \$3000 sports car of 1971 is today's under \$7000 sports car. The BMW 2002 that sold for \$3346 in 1971 has been replaced by a 320i costing \$9085. Incredible. These increases reflect not only inflation but the weakening position of the U.S. dollar. No longer can the average American car buyer afford to buy on impulse and trade for something else two or three years later.

Besides choosing the Ten Best Cars for a Changed World we



Best Luxury-Sports Sedan Over \$19,000
BMW 733i

KNOWING HOW fond we are of the 530i, it should come as no surprise that we also think very highly of BMW's newest sedan, the 733i. It blends all the smaller BMW's sporting characteristics in a slightly larger, more luxurious and more expensive package. The 733i has all the expected BMW attributes: It's handsome, spacious, well equipped, nimble and a joy to drive. Although it's about the same size as Mercedes-Benz's small sedans, the 733i is aimed directly at the larger 450SEL, a car that costs several thousand dollars more. The engine, of course, is BMW's lovely inline 6-cylinder, stroked to 3210 cc and a little noisier and rougher than previous smaller displacement BMW sixes. The six doesn't have the low-speed torque and flexibility of its V-8 and V-12 rivals, the 450SEL and the Jaguar XJ12L, but helping to compensate for this is the availability of a 4-speed manual gearbox. Overall the 733i has a less sporty feel than its smaller BMW sedan counterparts but we'd be hard pressed to name another luxury 5-passenger sedan that's as ready, willing and able as the 733i.

Best GT Under \$7000
**VOLKSWAGEN
SCIROCCO**



THE GIUGIARO-designed VW Scirocco is a repeat winner, but not because it lacked competition. The Scirocco would be an easy choice if all you were considering were its fun-to-drive aspects. It's a cut above the rest in handling, braking, roadholding, steering and ride. But when you start considering how small and light yet roomy and efficient the design is, you begin to appreciate just how remarkable

this small GT is. The sleek hatchback shape has one of the most space-saving mechanical layouts we've seen. And it's a car that hasn't stood still the past three years. VW has redesigned the front seats for more head room, the gearbox and linkage are much better than on earlier Sciroccos and the shifting is improved. There are also noticeable improvements in ride compliance and reduction of

harshness compared to the first Sciroccos, without a loss of the nimble handling for which we praised the first models. The engine/drivetrain combination also gets high marks. VW destroyed the engine this year, making it considerably smoother, quieter and more fuel efficient without a loss of performance. The Scirocco is a car that is very much at home in a changed world.