

Concept or Showroom Ready: Detroit and L.A. Rolled 'Em Out

By Paul A. Eisenstein



As sure as Christmas comes in December, the first weeks of the New Year bring two of the auto industry's most important events. And even if you never make it to Motown or Tinsel Town, there are plenty of reasons to keep your eyes on the Detroit and Los Angeles auto shows, and the ones to follow.

Last year saw the U.S. auto market surge to record levels, but with the uncertain economy, sales are starting to slip. That's bad news for the automakers-but it could be good news for consumers. Why? For one thing, you'll see a lot more rebates and other incentives in the coming months, as manufacturers vie for your heart, mind, and pocketbook. The industry is also battling it out with a tidal wave of new products, many of which took a bow at these two premier auto shows.

At the bottom end of the market, we've got the hip Pontiac Vibe. Like many of the new products hitting the road these days, the Vibe's not easy to categorize. It's one part hatchback, another part SUV. Perhaps more significantly, it shares its platform-and all-new engine with the next generation Toyota Corolla. Mazda's sport wagon is another, roomy alternative to mundane, entry sedans.

At the other end of the spectrum, the two shows revealed a boatload of luxury imports, including the new Mercedes C-

Class wagon, as well as the new M-series performance machines from BMW. The M Roadster and M Coupe get an extra 75 horsepower for 2001. Porsche's prototype Carrera GT is the ultimate road warrior. Its 5.5-liter V10

pumps out a tire-smokin' 558 horsepower, enough to launch from 0-60 in less than four seconds. Officially, it's still a concept car, but we'd bet on a 2003 production launch at a price of around \$350,000.

If these euro-racers are a bit rich for your wallet, consider the more affordable Mustang Bullitt, which was uncovered in LA. It's been 30 years since the legendary Steve McQueen film delivered Hollywood's most incredible car chase. But perhaps we can forgive the delay considering this Mustang collectible will provide an impressive 270 horsepower at a reasonable \$26,000.

Concept cars are always a big draw at auto shows like Detroit and LA, and this year was no exception. General Motors rolled out close to a dozen show cars in 2001, a concerted effort to update its stodgy image. And if last year set the pattern, perhaps half of those prototypes will eventually go into production. Keep your eyes on the Chevy Borrego and the slinky Buick Bengal.

Honda's Model X is hard to ignore, with its futuristic design and highly flexible interior. This super-ute "has real production potential," hints Honda chief Tom Elliott. And there's no doubt about the future of the Acura RS-X. It's a thinly disguised version of the automaker's next-generation Integra.

Long the show car trendsetter, Chrysler's got the striking Crossfire, a

retro-influenced roadster with a supercharged, 2.7-liter V-6.

DaimlerChrysler's Jeep division also used the Detroit show to take the wraps off its first all-new Jeep nameplate since the 1992 introduction of the Grand Cherokee. About the size of the new Ford Escape, Liberty is the replacement for the aging base Cherokee. DaimlerChrysler's also offering an early look at an all-new version of the Dodge Ram pickup which goes on sale this fall.

Trucks, it seems, are the hottest things on four wheels these days. In recent years, the domestic manufacturers dominated this profitable segment, but that's changing fast. Nissan's ready to run with its first-ever full-size pickup. BMW's scored big with its X5 "Sport-Activity Vehicle," and Detroit highlighted a new high-performance version at the Detroit show.

One of the Motor City show's most eagerly awaited introductions was Volkswagen's concept Microbus, the modern-day reincarnation of VW's legendary hippy van. Will it make it to market? There are some serious technical issues to overcome, but considering the potential demand, the German automaker is trying hard.

There's growing interest in green machines, and the enviro-minded Los Angeles show saw several relevant reveals, including the Dodge Powerbox. It's a stylish and roomy SUV powered by a combination of a CNG-fueled, 250-horsepower supercharged V6 for the rear wheels, and a 70-horsepower electric motor for the front axle. Powerbox's batteries are recharged by recapturing energy normally lost during braking or coasting. The combination drivetrain should yield significant improvements in emissions, performance, and fuel economy, and deliver a 350-mile range-if it goes into production.

In all, over 70 production and show vehicles made their debuts in Detroit and Los Angeles, and you'll be seeing many of them hit the showrooms-as well as regional auto shows-over the next few months.