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Mazda MP3 rocks
a new generation of car lovers



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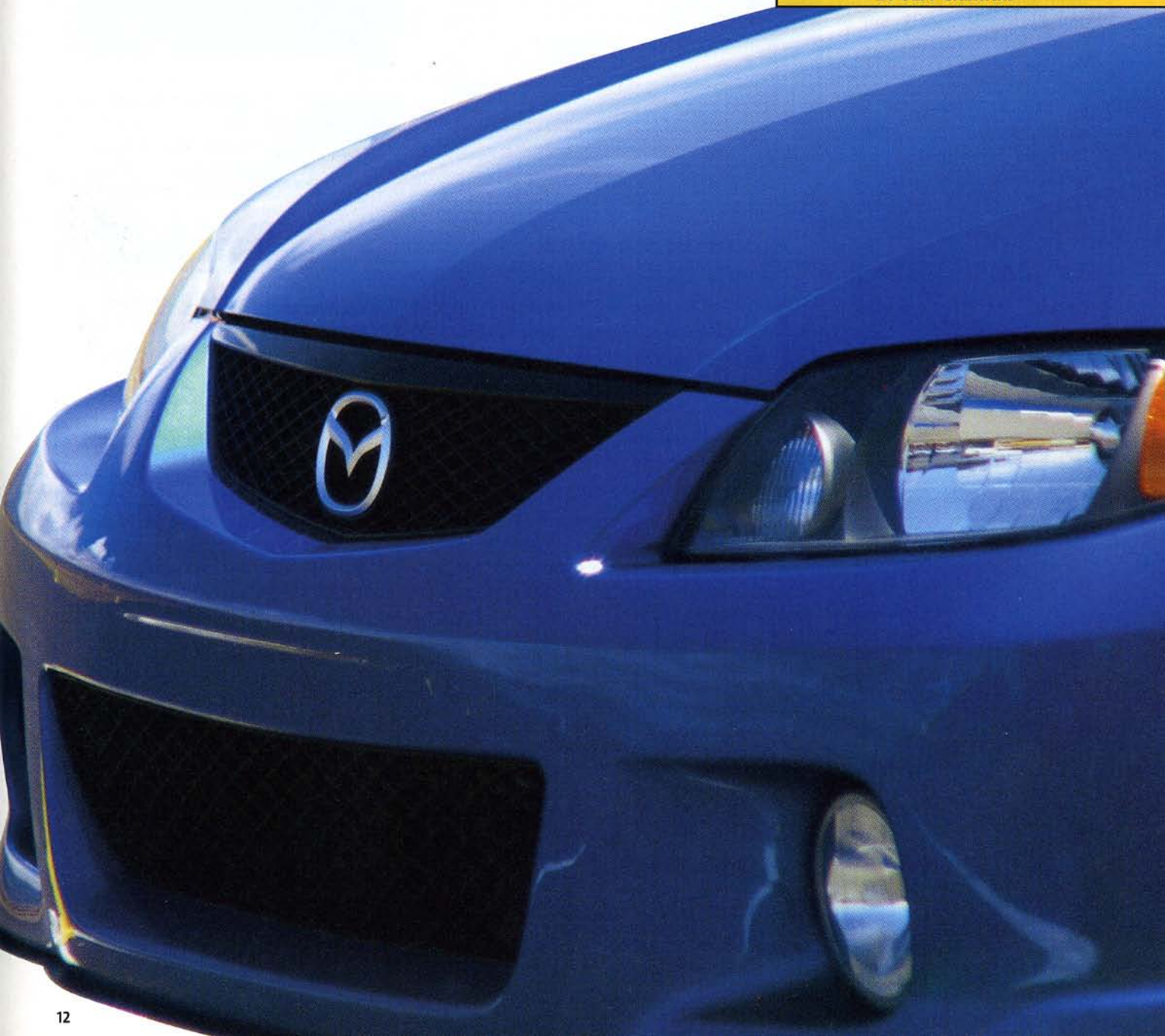
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Mazda Finds Its FOCUS

MP3 seeks to reclaim a performance image

The 2001 MP3 is the most significant new car from Mazda since the original Miata debuted in 1989. And, as was the case with that first roadster, get in line if you want to buy one. Mazda is only going to build 1500, all of which have already been ordered by enthusiastic dealers expecting a quick sellout. This begs the question: Why are we bothering to put it on our cover and write this story? Because MP3 isn't just an aftermarket-tuned Protegé, it's Mazda's future.

BY JEFF SABATINI



Understand Mazda's predicament. It made its name and corporate identity around performance in the early 1980s with the RX-7. This identity was still intact when it gave us the Miata, but Mazda has lost its focus since. First, the sporty MX-3 was canceled. Then the best RX-7 ever—a true supercar—fell victim to EPA emissions requirements. The midsize sports coupe MX-6 disappeared soon after. While the Miata has soldiered on into a second generation, it did so without any help from the rest of the lumps in the lineup. Once an enthusiast's marque, Mazda has become downright boring.

Enter The Ad. You've seen it: A blatant attempt to cash in on the last bit of cachet the Mazda name has left. As annoyingly effective as *zoom-zoom* might be at getting stuck in your craw, its premise borders on the preposterous. Mazda advertising would have us think it has somehow figured out how to imbue those commodity vehicles with performance traits usually reserved for sports cars. While this might have been true in the days of the 323 GTX, even the lowest-common-denominator car shopper can tell that the similarity between Miata and MPV ends at the winged-"M" badge adorning the grilles.

To wit: You can't sell an enthusiast a Cavalier just because it sits on the same lot as a Corvette.

But what if you made that same Cavalier, er, Protegé, a lot more like a Corvette, er, Miata? What if you actually backed up the advertising with product? Good product, desirable product.

That's how you build an image.

The MP3 Protegé is the first of what Mazda says will be a series of performance-oriented products from the company. Its

improvement to the base sedan is immediate and obvious: a more aggressive front fascia, a larger rear wing, distinctive interior appointments and seven- by 17-inch Racing Hart alloy wheels.

But Mazda didn't leave out the hardware, as the MP3 carries a tuned version of the front-wheel-drive Protegé's new 2.0-liter engine, producing 140 hp and 142 lb-ft of torque, with a five-speed manual tranny. The extra 10 horses and 7 lb-ft are the result of a reprogrammed engine computer, different intake manifold and a cat-back exhaust from Racing Beat.

The well-known Mazda tuning shop also provided the larger front and rear antiroll bars, which, when combined with a front strut-tower brace, stiffer springs, Tokico struts and a Euro-spec steering rack, make the MP3 nimble and begging to be driven hard.

And the name? It's a function of having the first mp3-playing sound system to be offered by an OEM. The Kenwood Excelon Z919 plays both normal music CDs and CD-R discs with mp3-format digital music through its 280-watt, four-speaker plus 100-watt subwoofer system. And while the audio system's interface is maddeningly complicated, it's just the kind of cool that audiophiles will go for.

Mazda hopes the rest of the package is the kind of cool the teeming legions of Type-R kids will go for. Wisely, the corporate image is not waiting for the forthcoming retro-old-guy RX-8. Wisely, the image is being built here and now—the first car company to offer a turnkey package that a self-respecting 19-year-old would be more than proud to show up with for test-and-tune night at the local strip. A car seemingly custom-built for the fastest growing of the SCCA's Solo II/autocross classes, Street Touring. A car

that's all show, and, well, some go.

Our initial experience with the MP3 showed that: (1) The performance-tweaked car is a lot more impressive—quicker by a bit, better handling by a lot—than any other Protegé we've driven; (2) the stereo does indeed kick ass; and (3) this still ain't no Civic Si.

The comparison is made for two reasons, the first of which is price. At \$18,500 including delivery, the MP3 is sitting right smack in the middle of Si territory. The second is even more simple: In the world of front-drive performance cars, the Civic Si is the car, the measuring stick against which all challengers must size themselves. At the MP3 intro, the editor of a West Coast sports car rag put it bluntly: "Why wouldn't you just buy a Honda?"

To this jeer, even Mazda must concede the MP3 is powertrain-deficient; there just aren't 160 VTEC-inspired horses in the Mazda. And compared to the Civic Si, the MP3 feels heavy. Compared to the Ford Focus ZX3, it feels really heavy, and at 2725 pounds, it is.

But, says Mazda, there are a lot of buts. First, to make a Civic, even an Si, look this trick, you'd need to spend some hard-earned cash, maybe even break a sweat. MP3: No wrench required. Perfect for the masses living in apartment buildings whose managers don't look kindly

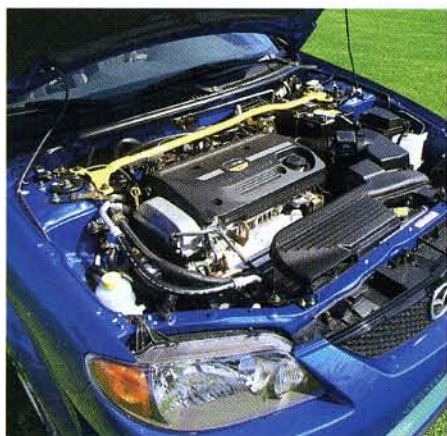


The blue MP3 sedan and yellow Protegé5 five-door share the same aggressive front fascia. MP3 comes with more trick bits already installed: performance suspension, short shifter, large rear wing and aftermarket wheels and exhaust.





The interior pictured is from the MP3; the Protegé5's is similar, but without the silver accents. On the exterior side of things, Mazda makes the roof rack and rear spoiler on the Protegé5 standard equipment. Kudos to whoever decided to make the rack easily removable.



on jackstands and orange extension cords running out of windows. Plus, there's the universal principle of youth: I don't want what everybody's already got. In a sea of Hondas, MP3 stands out without sticking out.

Perhaps more importantly is that the MP3 hits when Honda is down—the new Si Civic doesn't arrive until next year. Mazda is also beating similar sport-compacts from Nissan and Mitsubishi to market. With the potential to put the MP3 bits into dealership parts bins—possibly even expanding its underground, though first-rate, Mazda Competition program—Mazda has clearly taken a step toward legitimately reclaiming its proper place as an enthusiast marque.

Still skeptical? Consider: It just bought the naming rights to Laguna Seca.

But what promise does this hold for the rest of us, those who won't be receiving one of the excruciatingly limited supply of MP3s? How does a performance limited-edition make the pedestrian Protegé any different or any better? Aren't we still left looking for zoom,

tricked by that snotty little kid into thinking our grocery-getter is something more?

More, like five doors instead of four. More, like an aggressive fascia and aero kit. More, like a front strut-tower brace and three-spoke steering wheel. More, like the sort-of-new 2002 Protegé5, the anti-truck antidote.

We say "sort-of" because Mazda has been building a version of this sporty compact near-wagon hatchback for the world market for eons. The one we'll be getting here is dimensionally identical to the European five-door Protegé, the most significant difference being the front fascia (we get the same one sported by the MP3). The decision to bring the five-door here was under study since at least 1998. Apparently the financial wizards took some serious convincing, but as the Protegé5 fits philosophically into the newly performance-minded Mazda scheme, it was given a go.

Although the "financial case" that Mazda product planners built for Protegé5 has it accounting for only 10 percent of first-year sales and 15 percent in its second, there are some in Mazda's U.S. headquarters in Irvine, California, who will say off the record that they

wouldn't be surprised to sell fully half of all Protegé5s in the five-door configuration. The company sold just under 63,000 Protegé5s in 2000.

Protegé5 went on sale in May. With the only other five-door sedan on the market being the invisible Kia Spectra (one might also make a case for the PT Cruiser competing in this category, though it appeals to an older demographic), the \$16,815 Protegé5 should have the market all to itself. At least until Ford gets its five-door Focus into dealerships this fall. While perhaps Toyota's decision to get into the sporty five-door market with its forthcoming Matrix/Pontiac Vibe (not to mention the SportCrossover version of the Lexus IS 300) had no influence on Ford and Mazda's reportedly independent decisions, it does lend credence to the concept.

And driving the Protegé5 affirms it. This car should wake the public to the inherent hipness of a hatchback sedan—compact SUV functionality in a compact performance package. While the Protegé5's 2.0-liter engine is the 130-hp, 135-lb-ft version, which makes the car somewhat slower than MP3, it's still fun to toss about on its 16-inch alloys. It isn't any heavier than the MP3, but carries about 80 more pounds than a 2.0-liter Protegé sedan. The style more than makes up for the weight, especially with the standard luggage rack removed. And with 24.4 cubic feet of cargo space with the rear seat folded, there's plenty of room for a set of racing tires.

Or groceries. Though Mazda is hoping you might be inclined to the former. ■