

Ford celebrates 10 millionth Mustang while banking on car's draw

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Molly McQueen, the granddaughter of actor Steve McQueen, introduces the 2018 Ford Mustang Bullitt as it makes its debut at the 2018 North American International Auto Show on January 14, 2018 in Detroit, Michigan

The Ford Mustang—an iconic American brand and a symbol of

cool—reached a major milestone Wednesday as the 10 millionth vehicle rolls off an assembly line at a Detroit-area plant.

Ford marked the occasion for the car, celebrated in American song and film and recognized the world over as a quintessentially American cultural export, with a big party and parade at the Michigan headquarters.

It is a key moment for the carmaker, which is banking on the Mustang's wide appeal to help it grow global market share. US sales of the model are declining, but they are accelerating overseas.

"The Mustang is the best-selling sports coupe in Germany, as well as in the United States," Ford CEO Jim Hackett boasted in remarks to revelers assembled at Ford headquarters Wednesday morning to kick off the party.

As it celebrates the milestone, Ford is appealing to the sense of nostalgia for what is seen as the original "freedom vehicle" that exemplified the love of the open road. After all, the car was named after a horse that still roams free in the American West.

"I can think of no other American car that captures the love affair with the automobile that Americans have had," automotive historian John Heitmann of the University of Dayton told AFP.

"It is as American as one can have an American product."

'Freedom vehicle'

The Mustang germinated an entire subgenre of cars.

From a technical standpoint, the original 1965 model was not meant as a

muscle car intended to attract those who gravitate to fast wheels.

It was in fact one of the original so-called "pony cars"—a smaller, affordable, practical sibling of flashy sports cars intended to appeal to young professionals, including women.

But the Mustang became an icon almost from the start, in no small part thanks to marketing that would rival a modern-day iPhone launch.

It debuted in the spring, at the 1964 New York World's Fair, far before other companies that announced their latest offerings in the fall. It was hyped up in advance and automotive industry journalists were on hand.

Automotive historian Bob Merlis, at the time a teenager, witnessed the World's Fair launch.

"It was almost like pandemonium. People were so excited about this car," Merlis said.

"It was sort of a counterpoint to the very square, staid station wagon ethos that Americans grew up with in suburbia," he recalled. "It represented some kind of a freedom vehicle. It embodied that."

The car captured the public imagination, and that was reflected in its popularity on the big screen.

The car made its first appearance in 1964 in a chase scene with Sean Connery's James Bond in "Goldfinger," and American film star Steve McQueen drove a Mustang in the 1968 thriller "Bullitt"—cementing the car's cool factor.

It even appealed overseas, appearing in the 1966 Oscar-winning French film "A Man and a Woman" by Claude Lelouch.

And Wilson Pickett immortalized the car in "Mustang Sally," a rhythm and blues classic from 1966.

Global draw

Ford has been playing up that nostalgic past. At this year's Detroit auto show, the company unveiled a new limited-edition Bullitt Mustang, along with McQueen's original.

For its celebration, Ford intends to highlight Mustang owners' loyalty to the brand by featuring the first Mustang ever purchased—still owned by the original purchaser.

Mustang owners—known to form clubs and restore older models—were called upon to bring one Mustang for each year of the car's existence to Ford headquarters.

Owners responded, and the company held a 20-mile (32 km) parade Wednesday morning from its headquarters in one Detroit suburb to its Mustang assembly plant in another.

"It's been part of my life for a long time," Mike Magri, owner of five different Mustangs since 1988, told AFP while waiting for the parade to begin.

The celebration is part of a strategic decision by the American auto giant to focus attention on the sporty icon.

Mustangs soon will be one of only two passenger cars from Ford—along with a crossover Focus—sold in North America. All other Ford offerings will be trucks and SUVs.

Ford sold only about 81,000 Mustangs in 2017, a mere 0.5 percent of the

North American car market, according to Autodata. But Mustang sales are growing overseas.

Auto industry analyst Karl Brauer of Kelly Blue Book said Ford is banking on Mustang's pull as a cultural symbol.

"It sells extremely well globally," Brauer said. "So clearly, there's really a fan following."

Since Ford began exporting Mustangs in 2015, it has become the world's best-selling sports coupe, according to the company's figures—including in China, which by 2025 is projected to have twice the share of the global car market compared to the US.

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