



Old vs new *'The way it flows is exceptional'*

Ashley Oliver's early Eunos Roadster V-Spec is typical of the Japanese imports you can pick up in the UK today for as little as £3000. And it's a cracking little car – little being the operative word because, after the mk3, it feels tiny. Also rather tinny, and certainly less structurally stiff. Though the ride is quite soft, big potholes or ridges send a real shimmy through the body that you just don't get in the new car.

But never mind the structure. It's what's going on down at tarmac level and in the steering and suspension that really matters. And right away the steering's an improvement, with a more natural response and weighting, and offering a detailed stream of information about the surface and the tyres' hold on it. By about the third corner, I'm starting to feel the car understeer. No big deal, you'd think, but after the glazed-over sensations of

Mk1 (below) a world apart from the mk3, offering rich, confidence-inspiring feedback. It's a similar story for the mk2 (left), albeit with a slightly more mature feel. Top left: mk1's 1.6-litre motor perfectly adequate

the mk3s it makes me want to shout 'Eureka!'

You feel closer to the action at the rear too, and you can sense subtle shifts in loadings on all four tyres – plump 185/60s on dinky 14in rims. Crucially, front and rear feel as though they're working together, as though damping, geometry, roll – everything – is perfectly in tune. The result is that you're much happier to drive the car up to and over its admittedly fairly modest limits, the feeling of intimacy enhanced by your proximity to the road. And while the little Eunos hasn't got the weight of punch of the new 2.0, the 1.6 motor spins sweetly and has a nice rasp to it. It's ideally matched to the chassis.

Jethro's never driven a mk1 MX-5 before and he climbs out grinning. 'I'm amazed at just how much fun it is. The way it flows across the ground is quite exceptional. And it feels exactly as it looks light, responsive and easy to exploit.

'The engine isn't a ball of fire, but it's more than capable of working the tyres hard. You can sense the chassis shifting its balance even in quicker third-gear corners, the tail edging out if you carry a bit too much speed into the turn – but it's all in slow motion, and you don't so much wind-on opposite lock as just reduce your steering angle so that the car drifts through the corners all-of-a-piece. In slower turns you can kick the tail out more dramatically, but again it's easy to control. I'd put mine away in the dry summer months and revive it for the winter!

The mk2 may look quite different, but it's essentially the same car, just a bit more grown-up, a little stiffer structurally, a touch more refined.

Andrew Ackerman's late mk2 (known as a 2.5 in MX-5 circles) has a Larini aftermarket exhaust, which adds some welcome roort to the soundtrack, and the 1.8-litre engine feels stronger than the 1.6, but the car is also heavier, so subjectively there's not much in it performance-wise.

With bigger wheels and tyres than the mk1 (205/45s on 16in rims), the whole driving experience is weightier, the ride firmer and busier, the steering more direct. It's not quite as toy-like as the mk1, more hunkered down to the road as it strings the corners together, but it's obviously from the same gene-pool and you can still clearly feel the tyres working.

'Grip is slightly higher,' says Bovingdon, 'but not so much that it suddenly feels all grip and no finesse. There's a bit more understeer on a steady throttle than in the very tail-led mk1, and the transition to oversteer is a bit quicker than I remember, but it's still a car you can exploit at low speeds. Great fun, but not quite as magical as the original.'

Climb into the mk3 and you're struck not just by the superior materials and air of greater sophistication, but also by the fact that the scuttle's a lot higher, which immediately makes it feel like a bigger, taller car. The spec sheets show it's 20mm longer, 40mm wider and 20mm taller than the outgoing model, though perhaps more significantly it has a considerably wider track, by 75mm at the front and 55mm at the rear.

It's worth restating that, as we found during Car of the Year, there's not a great deal wrong with the new MX-5's ultimate on-limit handling. As

[Mazda MX-5s]

Bovingdon demonstrates for the benefit of Kenny P's camera, the mk3 is still easily controllable when the tail kicks loose. It's the handling progression before it reaches that point, and the feedback it gives you on the way, that concerns us. As Jethro says, the steering is darty but almost devoid of feedback, and it feels like the car's centre of gravity is about a foot too high. Despite the often jiggly secondary ride, there's lots of body roll (more at the rear than the front), and a tendency for quite disconcerting turn-in oversteer. It's almost as though this has been engineered-in to make the mk3 feel less inert.

'Doing the cornering shots with stability control off, the 2.0 Sport was literally sideways as soon as I put lock on to get around the corner, the soft rear obviously upset by the quick steering,' says Bovingdon. 'Less understeer than the mk2 then, but I'd rather feel the forces building up through the front tyres than have to instinctively wind-on opposite lock. I understand Mazda didn't want to give the new MX-5 too much grip, but the handling balance feels forced, unnatural.'

And then there's the 1.8. 'Although the 1.8 rides much better, there are no electronics to hide its handling peculiarities,' says Boshier. 'At low speeds it behaves much the same as the Sport, but in quicker corners I found it unnerving. On more than one occasion I had to correct unexpected and unprovoked slides on 70mph+ sweepers. Who said a 120bhp car can't be intimidating?' ➔

