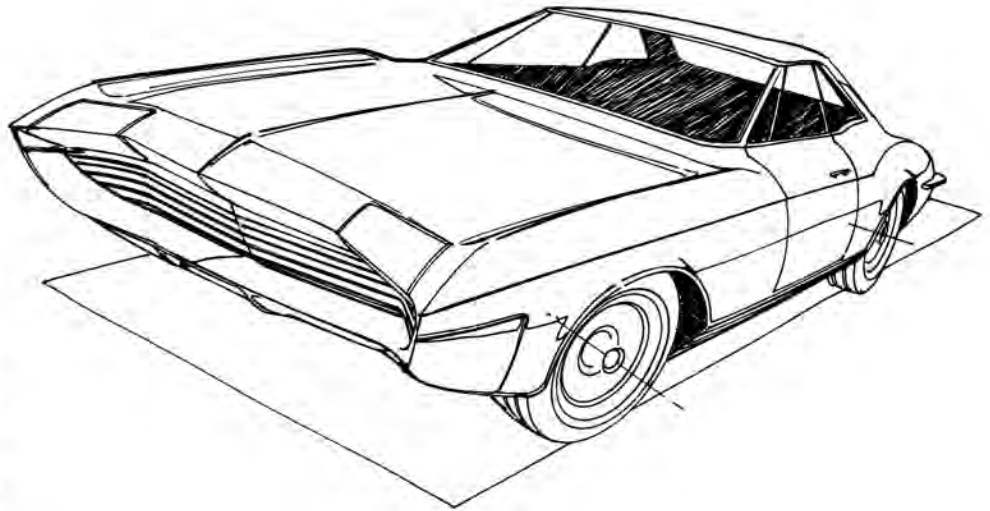


Olds may Produce an FWD for 1966



RETURN OF FRONT-WHEEL DRIVE?

THERE'S ALWAYS someone who doesn't get the word. Front-wheel drive, the soothsayers would tell us, is dead, kaput, buried with the coffin-nose Cord. The concept of powering the front wheels, which do the steering, instead of the back wheels has been proven impractical. The cost of engineering driveshaft arrangements from the front-mounted engine to wheels that move independently up and down as well as pivot sideways is, they say, too much more than that of a simple shaft to the rear axle.

Then what does Oldsmobile Division do? Put a front-wheel drive car into the development pipeline, of course. This is to be the long anticipated entry for the Buick Riviera/Ford Thunderbird/Studebaker Avanti market—the exclusive, personalized, luxury level sports car for those who find true sports cars uncomfortable or inconvenient. The aura of sportiness comes not only from the new "E body," which it will share with the Riviera, but also from the altered handling characteristics which result from fwd. In theory, the driver, with foot to firewall, can fling such a car along the twistiest road, front tires

clawing their path around the corners under full power and rear wheels meekly following along. The driver's supply of nerve runs out, so the theory goes, before the supply of tire adhesion gets dangerously low.

Well, why not? The English do it, with the Austin/Morris Minis. So do the French, with Citroen and Renault. Or Germany's DKW and Sweden's Saab. But those are not particularly luxurious and are obviously smaller cars; Oldsmobile just doesn't think in the itty-bitty idiom.

The Olds prototypes pounding over the GM proving grounds look about the same as Rivas, but there is a longer hood section and clamshell doors covering the headlights atop the grille. And, unlike the usual cobbled cars thrown together for engineering tests, these prototypes are finished well enough to be showroom ready with the mere application of wax. They could, then, be set for a spring announcement but will be held back until autumn.

There's a big difference between the European fwd cars and the Olds: The terrific torque of a massive engine. Not even the Cord churned out such power

(which was on par, actually, with the recently-revived Corvair-powered replicas) and certainly none has the 1000 lb. plus of cast iron bearing down on the front end. Olds will be using its new 425-cu. in. engine and 3.5-speed automatic transmission flanking the differential fore and aft, the front-mounted transmission returning the power in a U-turn via a hollow driveshaft such as Corvair uses. The strain such an arrangement must put on tires and universal jointed half-shafts during fast turns must be fantastic.

Constant velocity universal joints will be required at both ends of the half-shafts which carry power from the differential to each front wheel, adding to the costliness. In addition, there is a better-than-even chance that independent rear suspension will be specified—though a simple beam axle would be sufficient there. But the key to making fwd practical now, in such a strong and heavy vehicle, must lie in the newly-developed (in this country) radial cord tires. This development reduces any weird tendencies encouraged by a high powered turn and produces tougher tires to resist the double chore of steering and propelling.

So serious is the Olds effort that Ford Motor Co. has been forced to dust off its earlier test fwd Thunderbirds, and Chrysler has gone through the files for its test data on such configurations. Another GM division is also known to be watching Olds closely. Car buffs are watching because one advantage from fwd is the elimination of a transmission tunnel through the passenger compartment. They want to see if Olds stylists repudiate this plus factor by insisting on a typical full-length console.

—Bob Harrison

VARIATIONS ON a theme: Sketch at upper right shows Olds styling trends applied to a front-drive "E body," that below follows the Buick Riviera format with rear drive.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY GENE GARFINKLE