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Toe To Toe with Derek Jenkins On the New Mazda3 Volkswagen Alum Talks New Compact

By Eric Tegler | July 23, 2013 | 26





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The new Mazda3 could literally make or break the small Japanese maker. The 3 accounts for 40 percent of Mazda's U.S. sales so there's more than a little pressure that its design finds a favorable reception. Derek Jenkins, the man responsible for the 3's new look, says he feels

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that pressure but he digs it.

Mazda's North American design director Mazda since 2008, Jenkins previous gigs include stints as chief designer at Volkswagen of America and exterior designer at Audi. He's a SoCal native, a surfer and he knows from shoes. We put a few questions to Derek in Charlottesville, VA following the reveal of the new 3 in New York.

MT: *Years ago you played a role in designing Kobe Bryant Signature basketball shoes for Addidas. Could the Mazda3 hatch be considered a hightop? Any similar design imperatives?*



DJ: It's more of an ankle-top. You could easily do a good looking shoe from the Mazda3. Shoes have a lot in common with cars because they're directional objects. The proportions and lines of athletic shoes are very important as with a car. When we worked on that shoe, basketball shoe design was really over-the-top, super garish and multi-colored. I wanted a more clean look, prioritized like a car.

MT: *The 3 is such an important volume leader for Mazda. What sort of pressure does that impart when influencing the design?*

DJ: With a product like this, you're acutely aware from the beginning that if the car doesn't succeed, you literally threaten the existence of the company. It's as simple as that. Sure there's pressure but that's one of the reasons I like being at Mazda because there's a strong feeling that we still have to do something that feels bold relative to the segment. There's a unity in the company not to do something too conservative. That can be crippling and I think the industry suffers from that. But I don't think you have to make it polarizing to make it attractive. You want



2014 Mazda3 First Look



The Big Test: Compact Sedans



40 MPG Compact Sedan Comparison



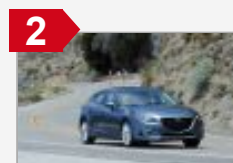
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1 The Big Test: 2013/2014 Luxury Sport Sedans



2 2014 Mazda3 First Drive



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to make a statement but you want a lot of people to like the car's looks.

MT: *Is the trend to unified brand aesthetics across model lines a good thing? Should an SUV and a sportscar have the same front end treatment?*



DJ: There's certainly room for variation within the family but I do think we've had some [design] inconsistencies in the past within the family. It's important with this generation of product that we establish a very stable baseline that everybody recognizes as a Mazda. Part of our challenge is awareness. People that know our cars love them but the average person doesn't know anything about Mazda. Having that family face and consistency is an important part of our strategy. A sportscar can step outside those boundaries or maybe it can show where we're going next.

MT: *So to what extent does the Kodo design language open design possibilities or is it really about limiting them?*

DJ: There's family resemblance and then there's cutting and pasting. We'd never go to that level of strictness. It's one thing to evolve incrementally, another to evolve aggressively. You have to create a vehicle lineup and replacements that enable you to take consumers with you. They don't go, "That was a great generation. Now, I don't know."

MT: *What distinguishes the Mazda3 from the Mazda6 in design terms?*



DJ: The front end proportion is quite a bit

4



The Big Test: 2013/2014 Full-Size Sedans



5



2014 Chevrolet Impala 2LZ First Test

The Mazda logo is on the left. The main image shows a silver Mazda3 sedan. Text reads: "THE 2013 Mazda3 WITH SKYACTIV® TECHNOLOGY". Below the car, it says "MAZDA3 GIVES YOU MORE PERFORMANCE FOR YOUR 40 MPG HWY.*". At the bottom, it says "MazdaUSA.com".

*Based on EPA estimates for 2013 Mazda3 | 4-Door models with SKYACTIV®-G 2.0L engine and SKYACTIV®-Drive 6-speed automatic transmission 28 city/40 highway MPG. Actual results may vary. †Available on select Mazda3 models.

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An advertisement for mobile apps. It shows a smartphone and a tablet. The tablet screen displays the text "FUTURE PERFORMANCE" and "CARS THAT'LL GET YOUR PULSE RACING 2012 AND BEYOND". The smartphone screen shows "MOTOR TRENDS NEWS".

different. The 6 has a slimmer, wider grille treatment. The 3 grille is a lot more vertical and narrower. That gives a more compact, sporty look whereas the 6 has more elegance. I think the similarities between the 3 and the 6 are important. The feedback we've gotten on the 6 is that it looks like a more expensive car than it is. Getting that kind of presence on a less expensive car is not a bad strategy. Obviously, the sedan will have a lot more similarities with the 6.



MT: In a recent interview you mention that you left VW/Audi because, "It just wasn't fun anymore. There was a formula now. And we just had to maintain our course." Is the new 3 evidence that the same now holds true at Mazda?

DJ: No, because we're in an accelerated growth phase. There will still be distinct characteristics based on class and concept. To me that's different than the uber consistency I was going through with my prior company which wasn't fun anymore. Even though there are similarities between the CX-5, the 6 and 3, you can see a progression, evolving details in the proportions and interior. But call it what you will. We're a little car company with a lineup of vehicles. If that's a formula, okay.

MT: The previous generation 3's interior drew significant criticism. How much of a factor was that in rendering the new



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interior?

DJ: I don't know if the motivation came as much from criticism of the 3 as from a general re-focusing of the brand towards interior design. It's clear that the trend to higher quality interior design, primarily driven by the European brands from the 90s through now, has become a much bigger priority for consumers. But I think it's fundamental to not over-style interiors. It has to be a place with a clear thematic quality but you don't need to be as expressive emotionally as with a Mazda exterior. The expression should be of a comfortable place to drive that looks high quality. It's a huge priority for us right now.



MT: *Current design fashion seems to limit the size of vehicle greenhouses. Do you think it's one that will continue? Isn't more visibility better/safer?*

DJ: That's definitely a styling trend. I think we've already tested the [styling] limits with respect to outward visibility. But pillar sizes have gotten huge for safety, rollover and side impact. Like anything, I think you'll see a reversal of that trend. At a certain point when you slim the glass down



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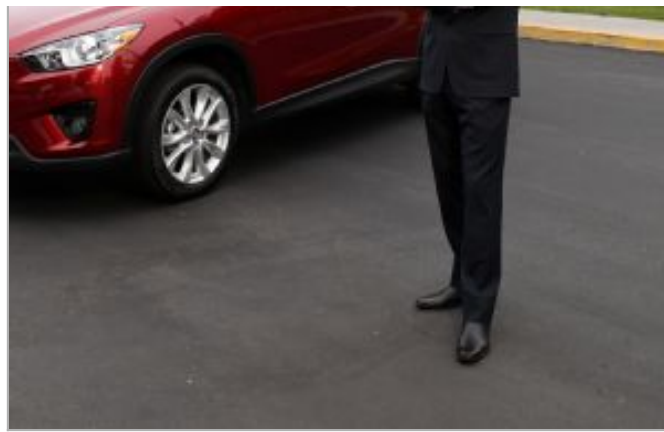
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and pull the beltline up too high, the cars get visually heavy. They start to take on that armored vehicle look. That's something that we've been quite conscious of. We're trying to get a lighter feeling and a sleek profile. One of the tricks in car design is playing with that side window graphic, making sure it has a slim profile is an important part of getting a coupe-like feeling. The tradeoff is visibility.



MT: *You're a surfer. What's the longest board the 3 will accommodate internally and still leave room for a front seat passenger?*

DJ: If you fold the rear seats, put it in diagonally and move the front seat forward a little, I'd say about 6'2". The person in the passenger seat might be a little tight on legroom but that's okay. It's surfing.



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The 2013 MAZDA3 4-Door

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 **t.g.711** 20 hours ago
Mazda is making some good looking cars
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saunupe1911

21 hours ago

For the record those Kobe sneakers were modeled after the original Audi TT, and that's where Jenkins' role came in. It's one of the best performing basketball sneakers of all time! They sold extremely well too..especially for an Adidas signature shoe.

Like Reply



skyguy

1 day ago

I really want Mazda to succeed because the industry needs a brand that pushes the envelope with an emphasis on performance and quality for a reasonable price. It makes the competition better. Unfortunately, there aren't enough buyers who care about those qualities, so Mazda will languish at the bottom. The consumer rules.

2 Like Reply



Traum

2 days ago

A reversal to the slit like windows and tiny greenhouses? From Mazda? Holy batman this is coming from the guy that designed the Mazda3?! A quick look at the rear doors and windows on the 3 and you will see he is totally not practicing what he preaches.

Like Reply



Michhhoach

2 days ago

@Traum He said a reversal FROM the slit like windows, not TO the slit like windows.

Like Reply



Traum

2 days ago

@Michhhoach @Traum

Doh~! Typing fail. XD

What I meant to say was, this guy sounds like a complete hypocrite to me. On one hand, he says he sees a shift away from those slit like windows and tiny greenhouses. And then he turns around and gives us the Mazda3, a car that he designed, and guess what – it has the very same slit like windows and tiny greenhouse in the back. The rising beltline on the rear door looks ridiculous.

He is clearly not practising what he preaches.

2   Like Reply



1_cmf

2 days ago

Well, this is not going to break Mazda. They listened and looked at the sales, profit and loss reports. They had to do something real quick or they would toe under and fade away. The new 6 is a winner. Why I say this? The local dealer can't keep them in. I have checked thinking of trading up to get better mpg. I have already seen several running around town. The 3 is going to fly off the showroom floors.

Like Reply



mlivshiz

2 days ago

"But I think it's fundamental to not over-style interiors. It has to be a place with a clear thematic quality but you don't need to be as expressive emotionally as with a Mazda exterior. The expression should be of a comfortable place to drive that looks high quality. It's a huge priority for us right now."

Yes! The interior isn't a place for artistic expression. It's a place for comfort and function.

2   Like Reply



B_Boy_007

2 days ago

Having all Mazda's instantly recognizable as Mazda's has its pros and cons. This makes you recognize the brand but not necessarily which model you're looking at. Making the most expensive model look like the cheapest model is not a good thing in my opinion. This is exactly the issue with BMW and Audi. Try distinguishing an A4 from an A8 or 3 series from a 7 series from afar.

Yes you know what brand it is but if the more expensive models have no more visual cachet than the other models, why buy the more expensive models?

Like Reply



TD-40

2 days ago



@B_Boy_007 Very true. I think the Altima and Maxima have done well over the years because they have been different. I can easily tell them apart on the road. But the only things that will distinguish a 6 from a 3 is size. I do think there is something to be said about having distinctly different styles between the \$18,000 car and the \$26,000 car.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



Michhhoach

2 days ago

@B_Boy_007 Right, but Audi's as an example have never been very stylistic and have catered to the business class car buyers. (BMW's are on the sporty-conservative side, now that is)

But on your point that some brands tend to look the same, if you look close enough, you begin to pick out the subtle design cues in them. Like Jenkins said the 3 has a more upright vertical stance than the 6; the grill is taller; the creases on the sides have a bigger curve towards the back.

Even Audi's have subtle design cues, it's just that their designs themselves have never been as dramatic so it does look like, they all look the same.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



nknorka

2 days ago

"People that know our cars love them but the average person doesn't know anything about Mazda." That is so true. As a Miata owner (my 3rd one) I regularly have people ask what it is. When I tell them it is a Miata the next question is who makes it.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



cchjo1

2 days ago

I was initially horrified by the Gauge cluster-have owned 9 Mazdas and felt betrayed by loss of the second large round gauge-however after seeing many photos of the concept with the HUD display I am more than a little curious-To make matters worse I saw the very same concept minus the hud on the McClaren MP4-12C-now I'm allowing my mind to open and at least check it out in person and watch it work-I will be buying my 10th Maz this fall-either the 6 or the 3-now leaning towards the 3 because of the hatchback format with the 2.5 motor -I've been told by a Mazda salesman that the screen in the middle does tuck in-hopefully so

Like Reply



MistyGreen

2 days ago

Do we know if that display screen tucks away under the dash?

Like Reply



MistyGreen

2 days ago

Nice interview. Sounds like the guy is a good fit for Mazda. And THANK YOU for asking about beltlines/visibility. Glad to hear Mazda isn't interested in going the route of the CTS coupe. I can't wait until the trend reverses, as he said, and visibility becomes more important than trying to make the sedan look like something it's not.

Like Reply



BlackDynamiteOnline

2 days ago

This guy is legit. Ever since he left VW/Audi, they've looked like they've been designed by computer. A lame one.

The 97 Audi A4, the 98 A8, the 2000 Passat were hot!

Now he's got Mazda flying right, design-wise. And their build quality is coming up too.....

BD

2 Like Reply



TD-40

2 days ago

@BlackDynamiteOnline Sort of how Peter Schreyer has overhauled Kia. Basically Kia has quadrupled and even quintupled sales since around 2008 just because of his stylish designs.

Derek Jenkins is doing the same thing with Mazda.

Like Reply



Dash Rendar

2 days ago

Gotta be honest. Those shoes look *** stupid.

Like Reply



TD-40

2 days ago

I wish MT would take questions from its readers before they do these interviews. I would have liked to know what's up with the cyclops dashboard? And why aren't they including a temperature gauge?

3 Like Reply



Johnny.5sp

2 days ago

@TD-40 So totally agree this is *the worst instrument cluster* I have ever seen. I have owned 5 Mazda and as good as this car may be that cluster would keep me from it!

Like Reply



Dash Rendar

2 days ago

@Johnny.5sp @TD-40 What are you talking about??? That gauge cluster is perfect! Tach is front and center, as it should be. You crazy!

1 Like Reply



TornadoGT1

2 days ago

@Dash Rendar @Johnny.5sp @TD-40

I think a binnacle look is better. Large tach AND equally large PHYSICAL speedo. With all the secondary data smaller and off to the sides. This setup here LOOKS cool but I think will be quite annoying from a functional standpoint during the course of normal operation. Golf/GTI setup is nicer.

1 Like Reply



Johnny.5sp

9 hours ago

@Dash Rendar @Johnny.5sp @TD-40 1980 rx-7 Tach in the center, Secondary gauges to the side big easy to read.

<http://www.rx7club.com/attachments/1st-generation-specific-1979-1985-18/289138d1206928968-1980-rx7-gs-project-all-idea-appreciated-02large-jpg>

Like Reply



OldSalt

2 days ago

I definitely like the looks of the new 5 door over the sedan!! Will visibility be an issue?? Hopefully road tests will answer that question!!

Like Reply



redav

2 days ago

Two things impress me here:

- "I think it's fundamental to not over-style interiors."

- "I think we've already tested the [styling] limits with respect to outward visibility. But pillar sizes have gotten huge for safety, rollover and side impact. Like anything, I think you'll see a reversal of that trend."

Despite what the cell phone crowd may think, simple & clean is much better than overly-gadgetized. I'm disappointed in how small the new 3's windows are (and how poor visibility is in new cars compared to my Protege5), but hopefully he is right that the pendulum will swing back towards visibility.

2 Like Reply



TornadoGT1

2 days ago

@redav

Sounds like his influence from VW/Audi. Simple and clean but functional interiors but blending form and function on the exterior with proper interior packaging might be something the industry needs to improve upon. I still think the Golf/GTI hits all of these

points that the Mazda3 is almost at but the Mazda3 does look a bit 'cooler' so I guess that is the tradeoff.

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