



Marvels in Automotive Design

1963 Studebaker Avanti

Avanti, Italian for “onward”, is a personal luxury coupe manufactured by Studebaker Corporation between June 1962 and December 1963. It was marketed as “America's only four-passenger high-performance personal car.” The Avanti was publicly introduced on April 26, 1962, simultaneously at the New York International Automobile Show and at the Annual Shareholders' Meeting.

Described as “one of the more significant milestones of the postwar industry”, the Raymond Loewy-designed car offered safety features and high-speed performance. Called “the fastest production car in the world” upon its introduction, a modified Avanti reached over 170 mph with its supercharged 289-cubic-inch R3 engine at the Bonneville Salt Flats. In all, it broke 29 world speed records at the Bonneville Salt Flats.

The car's design theme was allegedly doodled by Studebaker President Egbert on the back of an envelope during an airplane flight. Egbert's 'doodle' was to be an answer to Ford's Thunderbird and an attempt to improve the automaker's sagging performance. Designed by Raymond Loewy's team on a 40-day crash program, Loewy envisioned a low-slung, long-hood-short-deck semi-fastback coupe with a grilleless nose and a wasp-waisted curvature to the rear fenders, suggesting a supersonic aircraft.

The Avanti's complex body shape would have been challenging and prohibitively expensive to build in steel with Studebaker electing to mold the radical styled body in fiberglass. It was mounted on a modified Studebaker Lark 109-inch convertible chassis and powered by a modified 289 Hawk engine. A Paxton supercharger was offered as an option. The Avanti featured front disc-brakes, the first American production model to offer them. It was one of the first bottom breather designs where air enters from under the front of the vehicle rather than via a conventional grille above the front bumper, a design feature more common after the 1980s.

In December 1962 the *Los Angeles Times* reported: “Launching of operations at Studebaker's own fiber-glass body works to increase the production of Avantis.” Many production problems concerning the supplier, fit, and finish resulted in delays and cancelled orders. Egbert planned to sell 20,000 Avantis in 1962, but could build only 1,200. Sales failed to materialize in 1963 and Studebaker ceased operations December 20, 1963. A total of just 4,463 Studebaker Avantis were ever built. However, Avanti remained a passion for others beyond Studebaker. Several attempts to revive the car were made by other collaborations as late as 2006.