



GHIA STREAMLINE X “GILDA” COUPE

This flamboyant streamliner ushered in America’s automotive Rocket Age.

For her leading role in the 1946 film noir *Gilda*, Rita Hayworth was known as “La Vedette Atomique” (the Atomic Starlet). Giovanni Savonuzzi had Hayworth in mind when he designed the Streamline X for Carrozzeria Ghia, an otherworldly concept that took aerodynamics and airplane inspiration to avant-garde heights.

Savonuzzi was an engineer and aerodynamicist at the forefront of an exuberant postwar era in Italy, when designers were captivated by the advent of the Rocket Age. At Pininfarina, the Alfa Romeo Superflow featured an elongated, flying saucer-shaped tail on the chassis of a 6C 3000 CM race car. Not to be outdone, Bertone unveiled the first of three BAT concepts in 1953, which had upward-sweeping tailfins flanking a dome-shaped canopy and exaggerated pontoon fenders that surrounded hidden headlights. Ghia had previously introduced the Fiat 8V Supersonic, also designed by Savonuzzi, whose more graceful lines suggested a long and airy lightness with rounded and complex curvature.

The new Streamline X was influenced by all of these concepts, but the result far exceeded them. The tailfins each began in one unbroken line, stemming from a hidden oval grille like a jet intake. Sharp, knifelike blades, these fins were tipped in red and canted forward—yet there was still another two feet or so of bodywork beyond them! Like on the 8V Supersonic, the taillights again suggested afterburners, but this time they were mounted in what resembled an engine nacelle. Gilda’s two-tone, red-and-silver paint scheme drew inward from the hood, between pop-up headlights, and wrapped an otherwise

conventional-looking fastback passenger compartment. Disc-shaped wheels barely peeked from the bottom, as if to suggest an unnecessary vestige of a concept more UFO-like than road-bound.

Virgil Exner, vice president of design at Chrysler, was impressed: he had originally commissioned Ghia to develop the streamliner. Not only did the concept lead to a partnership on coachbuilt Ghia-bodied coupes, but it also inspired Exner’s Forward Look campaign, which was an entire revisioning of Chrysler’s design. Longer, lower, sleeker, and with arrow-shaped tailfins, the 1957 Chrysler, Dodge, Plymouth, and De Soto lineup all drew from the streamliner: even the triangle-shaped Forward Look logo mimicked the shape of the tailfins.

Only an experimental power source could match the streamliner’s looks. Ghia envisioned a gas turbine engine with a theoretical top speed of 140 mph (225km/h). An engine was never installed in its time, but decades later, a single-stage turbine was carefully fitted with a nod toward preservation. Chrysler would conduct the most research in turbine propulsion of the Big Three, which culminated in the 1964 Turbine Car, which made it to limited production. The man who ran Chrysler’s turbine division was none other than Savonuzzi himself.

The same year that Rita Hayworth starred in *Gilda*, the world’s fourth atomic-bomb test occurred at Bikini Atoll. Technicians painted Gilda’s likeness on the bomb’s side. The Streamline X was born of this intersection: the shock of Hayworth’s beauty juxtaposed by the force of a mushroom cloud.