

The Car That Lied

Everyone knows Elvis shot his Pantera. Almost everything else you've been told about it is wrong — and the truth is stranger.

By Daniel J. Voelker

Go down into the Vault beneath the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles, past Saddam Hussein's armored Mercedes and the Round Door Rolls-Royce, and a guide will stop you at a custard-yellow wedge and point at the steering wheel.

There it is. The mark. The King's temper, preserved in a plastic rim under fluorescent light.

Then the guide tells you the story, and you have heard it a thousand times, because the internet has been repeating it, word for word, for fifteen years: Elvis, 1974, a screaming fight with his girlfriend Linda Thompson. He storms out to leave in a cloud of tire smoke. The Italian car — beautiful, expensive, chronically unreliable — refuses to start. He pulls a gun and puts three bullets into it.

It's a perfect story. Rage, machinery, humiliation, evidence you can still touch.

It is also, in almost every checkable particular, wrong.

Start with the museum that owns it

The Petersen's own page for the car carries a headline that quietly contradicts every article written about it. Not three shots. **Twice-Shot by Elvis Presley.**

That's the institution holding the artifact, disagreeing with the legend built on top of it. And it gets worse for the legend, because the museum's actual description of the vehicle contains no shooting narrative at all. It describes a Ghia design by Tom Tjaarda, a mid-mounted Ford V8, and the fact that the car's styling made an impression on many — including the rock star who originally purchased it. That's all. The most famous bullet holes in automotive history, and the owner won't put a number on them in prose.

So how many were there? Here is where it stops being a trivia correction and starts being a story.

The bullet hole that isn't there anymore

In 2010, Matt Stone — then an executive editor at *Motor Trend*, and a man who had owned a yellow Pantera of his own for seventeen years — did something no blogger has done since. He got the keys.

He drove Elvis Presley's Pantera through Hollywood, and then he wrote down what he found. His account is the single best physical inspection of the car in print, and it detonates the recorded version.

Presley, Stone reports, often carried a small-caliber revolver in an ankle holster; one slug struck the steering wheel and exited the front of the cabin, shattering the windscreen. Fine — that matches. Then two details nobody repeats. He also shot out a tire. And there was a bullet hole in the driver's door, which was repaired and is no longer visible.

Read that again. Somewhere between 1974 and today, a bullet hole fired by Elvis Presley was filled, sanded and painted over, and the world's most photographed act of celebrity road rage lost part of its evidence.

Which means the car is not exaggerating the story. **The car is hiding it.**

And that mark in the steering wheel? It's a graze

The line that launched a thousand aggregated posts — two holes in the steering wheel, one in the floor — comes from a single walkaround published by Jalopnik in 2011, relayed from a museum collections manager. It has been copied ever since without anyone going back to look.

When a Vancouver Sun journalist asked a Petersen staffer to show him exactly where the King shot the thing, the staffer pointed to a bullet groove in the top of the steering wheel. A groove. Stone, running his hands over the same car, calls it bullet-grazed.

A graze and a hole are not the same wound. They imply different angles, different distances, different stories. And three holes was never a count anybody with the car in front of them actually made.

Now the part that changes everything

Here is the real revelation, and it has been sitting in plain sight on an Elvis fan archive for eighteen years while the automotive press recycled a museum guide's anecdote.

The Elvis Australia archive, drawing on people who were physically present, states that this is the car Elvis shot **on more than one occasion** — and preserves two separate accounts. Neither one is set in a lovers' quarrel. Neither one is set in California. Both are set in the back driveway at Graceland.

George Klein, who had known Presley since high school, told it like this. The Pantera had died on him while he was driving in Memphis. Elvis had someone come pick him up and

simply left the car at the side of the road; when his men eventually towed it home, it still wouldn't start, so it sat out back. Klein asked about it. And as Elvis stood there telling the story, he pulled out a handgun and shot the car.

The car started. It fired up and ran.

Myrna Smith, of the Sweet Inspirations, told a different one. She remembered a terrifying high-speed blast around Memphis — he was a great driver, she said, but she knew he was trying to scare her, and he thought it was funny — and then, when they screeched to a stop in the Graceland driveway, Elvis completed the shock treatment by pulling out a gun and shooting the dashboard, scolding the car for not running right.

No thwarted burnout. No argument with Linda Thompson. No Beverly Hills. Two different companions, two different days, two different provocations — and a man who apparently shot this particular car whenever it embarrassed him, the way another man might kick a tire.

The famous version — the fight, the foiled dramatic exit — cannot be traced to anyone who was there. It surfaces as museum patter, and then it goes viral. Thompson herself, still living, still giving interviews, does not appear to have publicly confirmed it anywhere.

Which reframes the object entirely. The Pantera isn't a snapshot of one bad night. It's a **record of a pattern** — and that's why the hole count has never reconciled. You cannot count one incident's bullets on a car that was shot on multiple occasions and then partly repaired.

Follow the money, and the money is fake too

The provenance story is recited as gospel: sold in 1976, traded in 1981 for \$300,000 in diamonds, then acquired by publishing magnate Robert E. Petersen.

Almost none of that survives contact with the record.

Stone reports the car passed through a number of owners before Petersen acquired it in the late 1990s — not 1981. As for the gems, the real story is better than the myth. In the early 1980s, when real estate financing was hard to come by, property investors often offered precious gems as partial consideration; in a much-publicized 1981 transaction, two individuals traded a supposed \$2 million in gems for their chance to drive like Elvis.

Not \$300,000. Not diamonds specifically. Not to the museum. And note the word *supposed* — this was the era of inflated gemstone valuations used to paper over deals, which means the most-repeated number in the car's history may describe a sum that never really existed.

And then there's the document that closes the gap, which not one article about this car mentions.

On **November 30, 1996**, at Rick Cole Auctions in Newport Beach, California, chassis 501954 — yellow over black, 31,000 miles, described by the cataloguer as having small rock chips, imperfect hood fit, and seeming very original — crossed the block as **Lot 130**.

The high bid was **\$150,000**.

It did not sell.

The market commentary is one of the great deadpan lines in auction reporting: without a copy of the Elvis memorabilia price guide to hand, the observer couldn't say what an Elvis bullet hole was worth — but as a Pantera, this was a \$30,000 car, and if the bid was real it should have been snapped up immediately.

Somebody in 1996 offered five times the car's value for the damage, and the seller said no. Months or a couple of years later, Robert E. Petersen got it. Every number in the popular story is wrong, and the true one is a documented, dated, lot-numbered fact.

The relic has been touched

One last illusion to burn. The car is invariably described as preserved, untouched, deliberately unrestored — damage frozen as history.

Stone found otherwise: incorrect rearview mirrors mounted on the fenders instead of the doors, an inexpensive repaint in a slightly too-green shade of the original Yellow Gold, a missing fiberglass engine-compartment bucket, and wrong-brand replacement tires on the original Campagnolo magnesium wheels. Museum staff, bringing it back to running order, replaced the carburetor and the fuel tank.

Repainted. Repaired. Re-plumbed. One bullet hole erased outright.

What nobody has done yet

Here is the strangest thing about the most famous shot-up car on earth: in fifty years, it appears that no one has ever examined it forensically.

The sources can't agree on the weapon. An ankle-holstered small-caliber revolver, says the journalist who drove it. A Colt .45, say the fan sites. A .22, says another account. These are wildly different guns leaving wildly different signatures.

The evidence is right there — a graze across a steering wheel rim, a penetration through a floor pan, a strike in a windshield, and, under a layer of not-quite-right yellow paint, a filled hole in a driver's door. A firearms examiner with an afternoon and permission could establish caliber, angle, and sequence. They could establish whether the marks are consistent with one event or several. They could establish, at last, whether the car corroborates George Klein or the museum's guides.

Until someone does that, the Pantera remains what it has been since 1974: a witness that everyone quotes and nobody has cross-examined.

It kept its mouth shut for half a century while the world put words in it. The remarkable thing is that when you finally check, the real story — a man who shot this car more than once, in his own driveway, out of sheer contempt for its unreliability, and once watched it start up afterward — is wilder than the one we made up.

REPORTING NOTES

The 1996 auction result appears in Hagerty's past-sales database, sourced from contemporaneous auction observation. The physical inspection details come from Matt Stone's road test of the car for The National, 2010. The Klein and Smith accounts are archived at elvis.com.au. The Petersen Automotive Museum's vehicle page describes the car as twice-shot. No documentary evidence — police report, insurance claim, or repair invoice — has yet surfaced for any of the shootings; every account is testimony or institutional retelling, and should be attributed as such.