

# Darryl Starbird's Le Pantera

## Return of the Prodigal Pantera

Story by Wallace A. Wyss  
Photos and additional information courtesy  
of PI Member Scott Brandt,  
Motoexotica.com and Mrs. Donna Starbird

**T**his is the story of a custom car. Not just the story of any custom car, mind you, but a Pantera custom car. Now there are those who would say that almost every one of the 6,000-odd Panteras imported by Lincoln-Mercury to the U.S. between 1971 and 1974 is now a “custom” because Pantera owners just can’t help improving their cars.

But we’re talking full “custom” here as in “Kustom;” as in lower it, lengthen it, put in the diamond tufted upholstery, set it on a bed of Angel’s hair and throw the custom spots on it. And, play an old Freddy and the Dreamers platter on the 45-rpm record player hung under the dash to set the mood. Maybe a little dry ice in a bucket to add some fog.

Let’s go back to around 1975. That’s when Darryl Starbird, a well-known practitioner of the art of customizing decided to do a Pantera. Starbird was a name that any hot rodder over 50 knows. He,



**Above:** Zoomy coachwork heavily disguises the original Tjaarda design. Wire wheels supplant the original Campy’s.  
**Left:** Faux GMC huffer still looks menacing.  
**Below:** Delta wing was added by a subsequent owner.

**Below:** Diamond button tuck Pantera seats.



**MotoeXotica**

Cushenberry, Jeffries, Barris, Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, the Alexander Brothers— they were the Gods of the welding torch back then, showing Dee Troit how they shoulda if they coulda.

The Pantera was a new thing for him, as before all of his customs had been based on American cars.

Starbird's "signature" was to have bubble tops. In fact, at least half a dozen of the 500 or so cars he has customized during the last 50 years have twin bubble tops.

But the Pantera doesn't. It was instead a lengthening of the car, especially in the nose, and a reshaping of the side so that the rocker panels now have a curve to them that is reminiscent of the third generation Dodge Charger of the late 1960's.

The roof was also customized, so that it resembles either a Mangusta roof from the side, or is there a little bit of Lamborghini Miura in there? The car was; HPNMA03020, a 1972 model that was three years old when Starbird bought it.

He did the car in steel, where some customizers back then, (Barris was the worst offender) used bondo, buckets of bondo. The most controversial part of the Starbird creation is the decision to go to no back window. Zip. Nada.

The wheels are TrueSpoke aftermarket simulated wires, carrying big Yokohama tires, size 225/50ZR-15 in front and 345-15-ZR15 in the rear. The fenders are artfully curved around them, so that it is obvious he knew exactly which size tires he was going to run when he built it—a mistake neophyte customizers sometimes make, whereupon the wheelwells look too big for the tires.

When he finished it, Starbird put it in many car shows. It was popular, drawing in the crowds. One man wouldn't go away. He took out his checkbook and asked: "How much do you want?" Starbird told him it wasn't for sale. But the man persisted. Show after show. Finally, Starbird told him "\$25,000", which was at that time about 2.5 times the price of a used Pantera. The man wrote out the check. The deal was done.

### Flash forward

Flash forward over thirty years into the next century. We're talking 2003. The proprietor of Motoexotica in Oklahoma, Scott Brandt, a PI member, who lives, eats and breathes collector cars, is offered the car. Not by Starbird. Not by the next owner. Nor the next, but we're talking like three owners later.

So many owners later, in fact, that the owner offering him the car doesn't even know who built it. He

**Right:** Ed "Big Daddy Roth" is presented with a Hall of Fame award by Mr. Starbird to his left.

**Middle:** A photo taken during the construction phase of Le Pantera shows the car's shape evolving. The Pantera was built and designed by Darryl. All metal work on the body was hammer-welded and contoured.

**Below:** The Kustom Pantera was purchased by Mrs. Donna Starbird from MotoExotica as an anniversary present to her husband. Mr. and Mrs. Starbird are shown here at a carshow in 1976. We dig the platform shoes!



CONSTRUCTION - 1975



just knows that he doesn't drive it anymore.

In fact, none of the owners drove it very far. It was a low mileage car, in effect, with a mere 33,307 miles on the clock. Brandt, who once heavily advertised in Hemmings when he had an unusual car of the 200 he sells a year, now makes it a practice to put the Oddballs on eBay. He likes eBay. Through eBay he has sold cars and motorcycles as far as Costa Rica and Venezuela. And he even bought a Douglas motorcycle from New Zealand. With the net, he says, “vehicle buyers and sellers have a world audience.”

But the Pantera didn't go anywhere on eBay, despite Scott having lots of juicy color pictures. It's not the car's fault, he figured. It's just that out there in car enthusiast land, it was probably a case of “Too Much of a Good Thing,” like envision if you will, maybe a 300-lb. Marilyn Monroe.

Pantera owners are ready for maybe a GT/4 copy, a GT-5 copy, a GT5-S copy, a wheel well flare here, a wing there, but a completely re-shaped body? No siree. Not even with the Sony Explode radio speakers and diamond tufted upholstery.

The bids only reached \$12,500, a pitiful state of affairs. Scott withdrew the auction, chagrined but realistic. He had found before that most of the cars he offered on eBay only sold from \$10,000 to \$20,000.

He understood the lack of serious offers. One had to admit the offer of a full-on custom Pantera was a bit off-the-wall, and, while legal, the car came so, well, undocumented. Where did it come from? Who did all that cutting and welding? He flat didn't know.

**Top:** The roofline is pierced now with the blower injector scoop. Please notice how the designer compensated for the lack of a rear window with this mirror system. Today, we would simply use a TV camera and dash display.

**Middle:** Handformed metal work is shown which involves an extension of the coachwork and rear fascia. Original rear cap and taillight buckets can be seen.

**Bottom:** In an earlier presentation, Le Pantera had a different paint and graphics package. The car was called “Marvel Machine”. A press release stated, “It houses a 500 hp 351 Ford Cleveland engine with a 671 GMC blower and fuel injection. A five speed transaxle transmission and full independent suspension. The gleaming Cragar wheels are 10” rear and 8” front with special wide tires. A little over 3,000 hours and \$30,000 was spent to make this Pantera a real “Marvel Machine.”





**Left:** The kitschy interior captures the essence of '70's Kar Kulture. Executed in leather the trim work was treated to the diamond pleating. The original steering wheel was retained with the pad only trimmed in matching textiles. **Middle:** The most daring feature we believe of the whole car was the elimination of the rear window in favor of a solid, upholstered bulkhead. The original press release addresses it as follows, "The sleek fastback has no rear window but the clear sunroof has an exposed rear view mirror that gives full rear vision. The beige interior was executed by Paul Matz of Wichita, Kansas."

**Bottom images:** The front end of the car represents hundreds of hours of labor. The quality of the metalwork is a trademark of the showcars built by Mr. Starbird. The grill is made from aluminum and hand formed.

### The Mystery Offer

Then came the mystery lady with the mystery offer, via eBay. She said she wanted to buy the car for her hubby to celebrate their Golden Anniversary. Scott told her that he wanted more than the last bid.

He was a little curious why she wanted it, but figured, hey, one man's weed is another man's flower.

They came to terms and she sent a deposit. She wanted him to hold it several months until the actual anniversary so she could surprise her husband, but Scott didn't want to wait that long for the rest of the money. So the mystery lady told her hubby about his present and he was excited. More than most car guys because he, in fact, had built the car almost 30 years earlier.

His name: Darryl Starbird, now 70 years old.

Now that the secret was out, she was able to get the rest of the money and the car went back to its creator. The Starbirds have a museum in Afton, Oklahoma, featuring many of the cars her husband created, and now, presumably, it will occupy pride of place.

To Scott, whose offerings can be seen on his website [Motoexotica.com](http://Motoexotica.com), it was one of the more satisfying deals he has made. "I got some crabby cat-calls from guys who said something like 'what kind of fool customized that Pantera?'" recalls Scott. "They didn't know that every Pantera is customized." Scott has owned maybe five or six Panteras, and various other exotics including Lamborghinis. He is careful not to fall in love with any car in particular. "Every car is for sale," he says. For him, the fun is in the art of the game,



the buying, and hopefully, selling at a profit.

“I love Panteras because they have gobs of power in that 351,” he says. He also likes the Mangusta although he feels it has a lot more limitations in the driving than the Pantera.

Scott expresses a bit of regret that the seller who brought the car to him didn’t know about the Starbird connection. “If I would have known that, I could have mentioned it in the ad,” he says, “Maybe got a better bid.”

As it was, the car went for below \$25,000, which is less than half of what you would have to pay to have such a car built today.

And so it is. We at PI take off our hats to Scott, for returning the Pantera to its “rightful” owner.

We have seen the DeTomaso factory’s new design for the Pantera of the 21st century but we ask our readers, would the folks over in Italy be offended if we asked them to give a look at the Starbird car before they “harden” their design for their newbie? I mean, diamond tufted upholstery aside, it’s got something going for it...or is beauty strictly in the eye of the beholder?

**Footnotes:** PI, upon inquiring at the Starbird museum, (officially called the National Rod & Custom Car Hall of Fame, in Afton, Oklahoma) received these comments from Donna Starbird, currently celebrating her 50th Wedding Anniversary to Darryl.

“We called the car Starbird’s ‘Le Pantera’. The way it was designed is that Darryl sees the design in his mind, lays it out full size in tubing on the car and then hammers the sheet metal to cover the tubing, whereupon it is welded together. It took three months to build.”

“It was one of his more complex cars, on scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the most complex) it was probably an 8. It doesn’t really have a periscope. There is a non-opening glass panel in the roof; you look through it to see a rearview mirror on the roof.”

“The color he selected was a favorite of his, called ‘Candy Brandywine,’ basically hand mixed tan tinted pearl acrylic.”

“He has always regretted selling it, because he said it was one of his favorites.”

The Starbirds have two sons in the family business, Cliff Starbird and Rick Starbird. A daughter, Debra Starbird is Managing Editor of *Custom Rodder* and *Street Rodder* Magazines (Primedia).

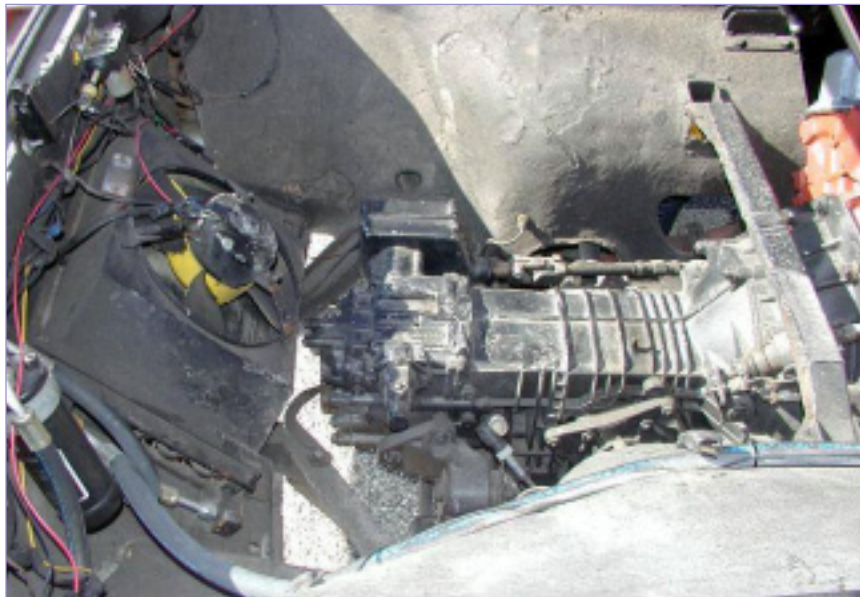


**Above:** In “Marvel” livery, the paint scheme was a blending of purple, blue and red.

**Right:** This current picture shows the Delta wing that is high mounted on the stern and adds little to the design.

**Below:** The original look of Le Pantera, you either love it or loathe it.





**Above:** The ZF has been painted. It is too bad that the engine bay wasn't highly finished like the exterior and the powertrain treated to a full polish, plate and powderpaint.



**Above:** The engine by history has been overhauled but the exact components used and specifications are unknown. Most probably the car will be displayed with the engine bay closed.  
**Below:** The door panel trim is also matching beige and diamond tufted.



**This is the actual ad text that appeared on eBay:**

**M**otoeXotica is offering one of, if not THE MOST outrageous Pantera's ever seen on planet earth with only 33000 ORIGINAL miles! This 1972 Pantera has a professional customized steel fabricated body that has to be seen to be believed. The fenders, hood, roof panel, nose, aluminum grill, and tail light section have all been custom fabricated and look UNBELIEVABLE!! When they were customizing this car they didn't stop with just the outside. The inside is all custom diamond tuck and in wonderful overall condition.

The body is all steel and in fabulous condition. The car is covered in a Champaign / Burgundy color combo that is near show quality. It only has a few minor scratches on the front bumper that are under the paint and slightly show. The fenders are flared out and cover the monster 345/35/ZR15 Z-rated tires in the rear and 225/50/ZR15's in front. They are Yokohama AVS tires that all have good tread life left on them. They wrap around great looking chrome wire true spoke wheels with DeTomaso Knock off center caps.

There are minor stress cracks on both A posts as they meet the front fender. Also there is some minor curb rash on the right side ground effect by the rear wheel.

The mileage on this car is ORIGINAL and shows 33307. The VIN# is THPNMA03020. Car is being sold on a clean ACTUAL mileage title.

The rear has been extended about 12 inches past the original bodyline, which is still visible when you open the rear hatch. The custom tail light assembly looks great and is fully functional. The rear trunk is custom built and opens with a push of an electric button under the car. On top of the trunk there is a GT-5 style Delta wing that is made from aluminum that really sets this car off. The front end has also been extended and has a custom fabricated aluminum grill. The roof panel has a customized glass panel roof with stationary telescope style rear view mirror.

Inside the seats, door panels, and panel behind the seats are all custom diamond tuck vinyl that looks great. The dash and center console have also been reupholstered in matching tan color vinyl. There is a leather wrapped GT steering wheel with DeTomaso Center cap along with a 200 MPH speedometer. All gauges appear to be in good working order along with the removable faceplate Sony AM/FM/CD player that sounds great through the Sony Explode 6x9 speakers behind the seats. The five

speed manual transmission shifts smoothly and is connected to the original ZF gearbox. The carpets and seats are all in great condition with no visible wear to be found. All wipers, signals, and lights work except for the right low beam headlight, which is currently inoperable.

The monstrous 351 Cleveland V8 engine has been recently rebuilt as stated by the previous owner. I do not have any receipts for work performed. There are aftermarket headers on this car and a custom fabricated blower cover and hood scoop that look great!

**Description of the National Rod & Custom Car Hall of Fame:**

Located an hour northeast of Tulsa, Oklahoma. The 40,000 square foot modern facility houses over 40 custom vehicles by world renowned custom car builder and designer, Darryl Starbird as well as many other famous hot rod and custom car builders. The museum is packed with photos and memorabilia of famous custom built vehicles including street rods, nostalgic custom cars, vans, pickups, sport cars and experimental bubble topped concept looking vehicles of the future. Many are priceless.

Recognized as the first and only National Hall of Fame honoring the individuals that have created thousands of these types of vehicles since the fifties. The Hall has inducted thirteen builders thus far including George Barris, Neil Emory, Darryl Starbird, Boyd Coddington, Roy Brizio, Gene Winfield, Joe Bailon, Ken “Posies” Fenical, Dick “Magoo” Megugorac, Bill Cushenbery, Carl Capser, Ed “Big Daddy” Roth and the Alexander Brothers.

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*Above: Darryl Starbird today.  
 Below: Starbird's Crystal Mercury*



*Darryl Starbird's  
 Rod & Custom Car Hall of Fame*

*Right: A portion of the Rods and Custom Cars found at the Hall of Fame Museum. Their ranks will be joined by the feature Pantera. Plan on visiting*



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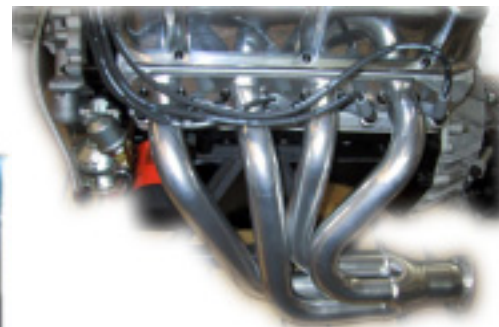
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Klas and Kimber Norrhed's 427 Pantera engine.

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