

Sound of the Suburbs

Behind a garage door on a quiet street in suburban Los Angeles, something stirs... Welcome to the real-life Wisteria Lane

Words: Nigel Grimshaw Photography: Matthew Howell



Suburbia. Nuclear families; beautifully manicured lawns; kids playing football, cricket and baseball; dogs barking in back gardens. Relentless boredom, conformism, ordinary folk living their lives in peace. But behind the freshly washed net curtains and pristine front doors there thrives a hidden underbelly. All life is there if you care to peel back the layers and take a look: eccentric millionaires; undiscovered artists... and Pantera collectors. Passion and obsession locking horns with the suburban nightmare. »

You should, of course, never judge a book by its cover...

Point your car away from central Los Angeles, away from Long Beach and Hollywood, heading inland. Travel away from the wall-to-wall housing and space opens up. Grass and trees appear. The houses have gardens, space around them to breathe. SUVs sit on driveways, freshly washed and polished. Dog walkers stroll the streets. You Are Now Entering Suburbia.

Jan Taraszkiwicz's house stands on a corner plot. Finely shaped shrubs and hedges line the freshly cut lawn, which butts up to a double-width drive. It's a sunny Sunday afternoon and not a soul is stirring. I can't help but think we've driven onto the set of *The Wonder Years*.

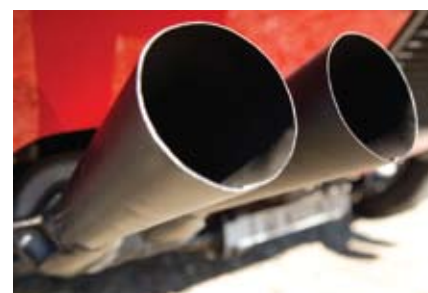
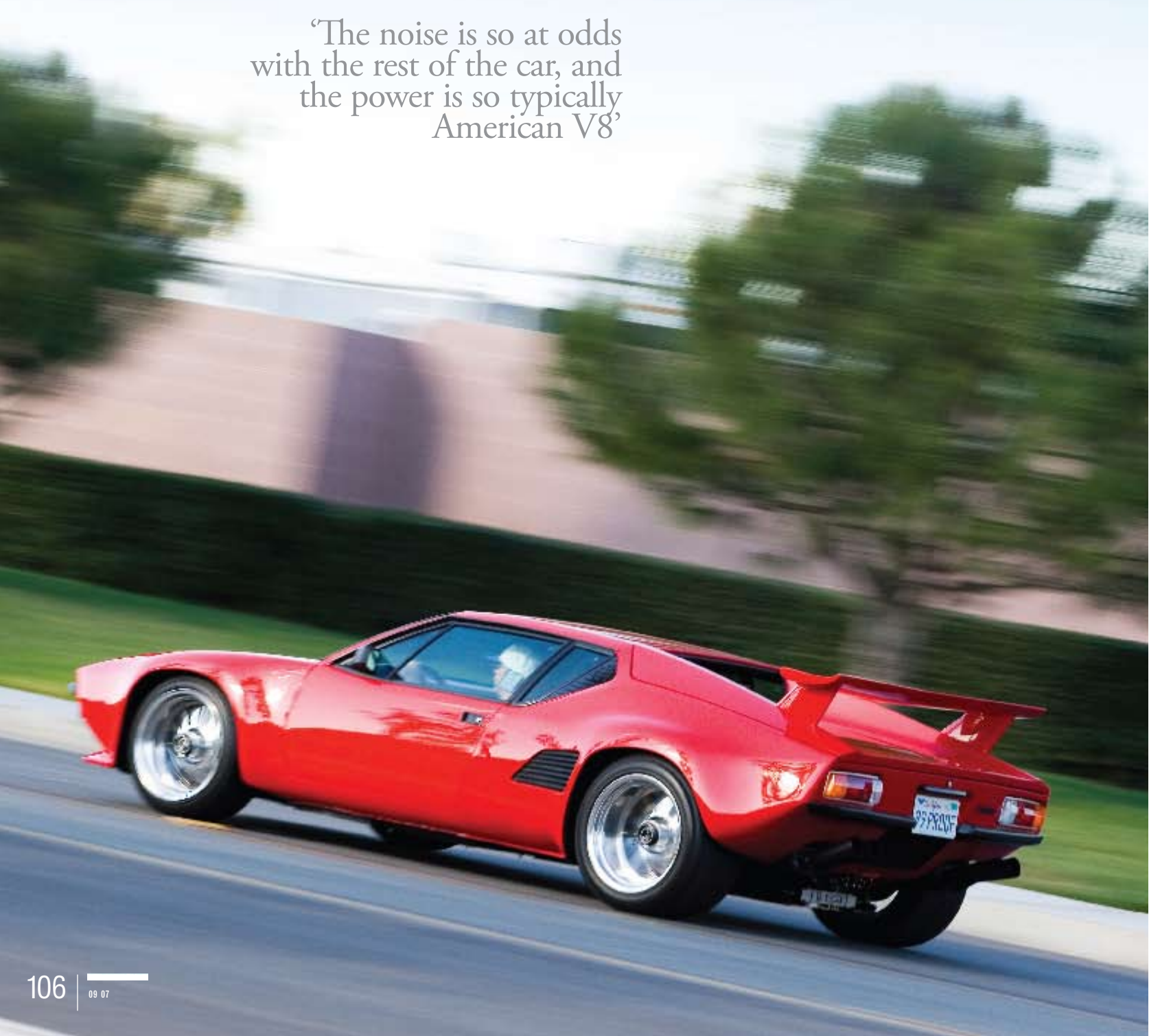
The house looks as deserted as all the rest on the street until, somewhere close, an electric motor whirrs into life. The garage door starts to quiver, then rumbles upwards and over. The gap between driveway and door-bottom steadily starts to grow, revealing acres of Michelin rubber, quad exhausts and that oh-so-familiar Pantera script.

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Electric lights flicker on inside the garage as the door completes its climb, and Jan stands proudly between his red 1973 GT5S conversion and his 1972 cranberry Group 4. The remaining triplet, a 1973 Pantera L, sits outside the house, the daily driver of the fleet. Pictures line the garage walls, every one of a Pantera. There's a tool box on one wall and a work bench at the back.

Jan clammers into '99 Proof' and fires the engine. The front air shocks hiss into life and lift the car over a nasty lip before Jan rolls it slowly out into the sun. Curtains twitch and dogs begin to bark.

'99 Proof' started life as a Pantera L before previous owner Warren Person got together with hot rod builder 'Fat' Jack Robinson. Robinson restored the car completely, but went much further by using factory GT5S flares and a steel front air dam: the steel flares alone cost in the region of \$25,000-30,000 and that is before the time-consuming and intricate fitting process is factored in.



'It's an Italian hot rod,' says Jan as he circles the car. 'I first saw a Pantera when I was on my way to school in upstate New York. I saw one go by – or rather I heard it go by – and decided then and there I'd own one someday. I don't have any hot rod background to speak of but the combination of Italian design and American "hot rod" engine is a hard one to beat.'

'99 Proof's' engine is a highly polished 417 cubic inch V8 which uses an aluminium block. Built by Russ Fulp Race Engines, it puts out well over 600bhp and cost in excess of \$70,000 to build.

Climbing into the cabin it is hard to forget these numbers; even harder when the key twists the V8 into life. Just like a hot rod, the Pantera wobbles on its tyres as it sits on the driveway warming the oil through. The duality is impossible to ignore, those fine Italian lines screening the sledgehammer engine beneath.

Onto the deserted, tree-lined roads that make up Jan's neighbourhood and I'm expecting muscle car vagueness. The engine thrums just behind my head: it's coming from the right direction for a supercar, but it's more big-block than boxer. Reflections flash back from the living room windows. The purposeful stance, the deep red paint and the exaggerated lines. Alejandro De Tomaso's design ethic keeps it from descending into a cartoon farce.

Onto the freeway now and there is no escaping the landslide of torque that's just a gentle lean on the throttle away. Gone is the heavy awkward feel of the suburban roads; the car now tightens and squats as the noise builds and the speed increases. Close your eyes and you could be in a hemi Barracuda or Pontiac GTO. The noise is so at odds with the rest of the car, and the power is so typically American V8. So much torque. The Pantera seems to just pull and pull, no matter what you do with the gearbox.

The palm trees flash by on either side as we work our way up through the five-speed ZF transmission. Thankfully it turns out not to be the disturbing experience pretty much every manual muscle car can be. The shift is precise but not sanitised, and you have to put some oomph into it. Third isn't two or three miles east of second, as is usually the case in your average Roadrunner or Charger.

When it went on sale the Pantera cost the bargain price of \$10,000. For that you got all the benefits of a mid-engined sports car. Pushing it through corners isn't the white-knuckle act of faith you might think it should be. In fact, compared with the best of the conventionally laid-out cars from the period, the speed you can attack bends with is astonishing. The Pantera's response to steering and throttle inputs is instantaneous and it's this and the lack of body roll that makes corners such fun.

Above
We suspect Jan has a bit of a reputation locally – spot the old Maserati parked round the corner...

Above
Black-trimmed interior is relatively subtle, but the same can't be said of the engine bay.





‘Pedestrians know it’s something special: they can see that, hear it and feel the rumble through their knees’



Above and right

Red GT5S catches the eye, but orange Pantera L shows simplicity of Jan’s (pictured far right) original 1973 car.



Equally fun are the mystified looks on the faces of fellow road users and roadside joggers as we sweep by. Truth to tell, the standard Pantera is a rather subtle, laid-back supercar, perfect for southern California. On the other hand the GT5S accoutrement lavished on Jan’s car is far from easy on the eye. It is aggressive, extrovert, even menacing. Huge wheelarch extensions battle to cover the massive 245/40 ZR17 and 355/35 ZR17 tyres. The front arches then flow into a hugely exaggerated spoiler. Everything about the GT5S is bigger and bolder. Dark, shadowy brake ducts bury themselves in the rear arches.

And if all this still seems a bit understated then the enormous delta wing really does dot the Is and cross the Ts. Pedestrians and fellow road users know it’s something special; they can see that, hear it and feel the rumble through their knees. It’s bright red so it must be a Ferrari. Wrong, it doesn’t sound like a Ferrari. A guy in a pick-up truck rolls down his window and leans out, keen to know what’s been filling up his rear-view mirror. He’s none the wiser when he hears ‘Pantera’.

Astonishingly, ‘Fat’ Jack Robinson finished his work on this car almost 20 years ago and little else has been touched in that time, apart from keeping it in good working order. Pulling to a halt outside Jan’s house it’s equally clear that his cranberry Group 4 has benefited from the same quality craftsmanship as ‘99 Proof’.

This time the car was built by Shell Burger, whose work has claimed awards at Pebble Beach.

As with the GT5S, the cranberry Group 4 features a considerable engine, this time based on a 351 cubic-inch Cleveland V8 stroked to 383 cubic inches. Notching up 520bhp and 510lb ft of torque the Group 4 lags behind the GT5S on power, but makes up for it in looks. The body is flawless and has been reinforced in all the critical places, such as the tops of the rear wings near the roof and around all the hinges. The lines have also been sharpened and accentuated.

The orange Pantera L, on the other hand, is the car that started it all for Jan some 20 years ago. And while it doesn’t have quite the same power as the other two, or the same amount of time and money lavished on the bodywork and details, it somehow looks more at home here in suburbia.

Peel back the Pantera’s finely crafted Italian layers and beneath all is snarling muscle car. It seems to be the perfect exotic for the suburban streets, where nothing is quite what it seems.

As we pull away from Jan’s place I take one last look in the rear-view mirror. The Panteras are, once again, safely put away and the up-and-over garage door is whirring earthwards. Just another summer Sunday afternoon in suburbia, where you should never judge a book by its cover. 