

# Claws celebre

**Richard Heseltine** toasts 40 years of Panther with the wild and often retro-inspired designs from the fertile imagination of Robert Jankel PHOTOGRAPHY RICHARD HESELTINE ARCHIVE/LAT

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## LAZER

Every creative journey begins with a problem, in this case how to make a V12 beach buggy-cum-sports car. Built at the behest of the Canadian importer, the one-off Lazer emerged in 1974 with straight-six Jaguar power and a front beam axle. The customer had ordered it as a present for his wife, but she wasn't impressed. Panther offloaded it onto a 14-year-old Iranian prince instead.



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## 2 FF

Never afraid to take on small-series commissions, Jankel built the FF for Swiss concessionaire Willi Felber in '74. Felber's Haut Performance concern also happened to be a Ferrari agent, hence the second-hand 330GTC donor car. Jankel admitted to taking his inspiration from the Ferrari 125, although it was far from a straight crib. According to PR blurb from the time, it could top 160mph.

Felber was sufficiently impressed with the FF to initiate a series of replicas using new platforms. Ferrari didn't exactly give its blessing so, while the demand was there, just seven cars were built due to a limited supply of parts. The final example was finished in '75, but Giovanni Michelotti later went on to create a batch of near-identical cars for Felber.



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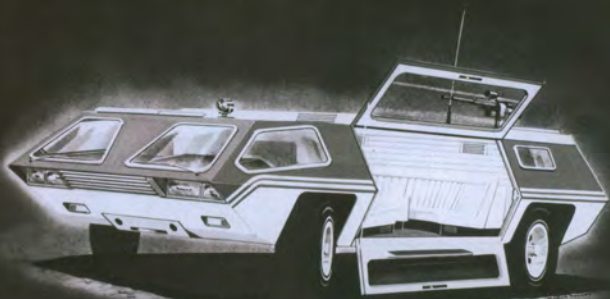
It was a cavalcade of craziness, one that appeared to have crash-landed into the ordinary world. From the kernel of a one-off Jaguar SS100-style roadster grew a marque not conducive to moderation. Sometime saloon-car racer Robert Jankel left the family textile firm to form Panther Westwinds in 1972. A likeable and modest man, his creations stretched credibility but they shone brightly in a decade that pulsed with blandness. From pseudo-Bugatti Royales to six-wheeled supercars, rearranged Range Rovers and beyond, you might not have liked his designs, but you couldn't ignore them.

While Panthers remain easy prey for those predisposed to dislike them, even the most hard-bitten arbiters of taste will admit that they were well made, Jankel employing coachbuilders with decades' worth of experience. Panthers were initially the preserve of the super-rich, customers including Middle Eastern royalty, plus the likes of Elton John, Oliver Reed and Billy Connolly all beating a path to Weybridge.

The decision to edge towards the mainstream with the Lima would lead to Jankel's departure from his own business after a spurned Japanese importer failed to release homologation papers to the new concessionaire. Debts accumulated and the receiver was called in towards the end of '79, but Panther would live on under Korean ownership and Jankel bounced back making cars under the Le Marquis banner among others.

The new regime changed direction with the Solo supercar. Unfortunately, this forward-thinking device cost a fortune to develop and its potential was never fully realised. In 1990, the marque was effectively mothballed. It had been quite a ride. Join us as we celebrate the best, worst and maddest of a peculiarly British breed.

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## PANTHER BMRV

### 4 BMRV

Panther released this artist's impression in the mid-'70s. Dubbed 'a luxury off-road conference vehicle', and equipped with everything the discerning tinpot dictator could need (spot the machine gun), it never made it off the page. Shock.

### 5 KALLISTA

Production of the Lima's successor was running at about 300 cars per annum by late 1984, with the model homologated for sale across Europe, as well as the USA and Japan. Aluminium panels were pressed in Korea and shipped to the UK.



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#### 6 SIX

Priced at £39,950 – in 1978 – and packing a twin-turbo 8.2-litre Caddy V8 mounted amidships, this barmy six-wheeler was a victim of Panther's crash of '79. Just one car was completed by the factory, another later being cobbled together from parts.

#### 7 DEVILLE LIMO

Exploring the furthest reaches of bad taste, this De Ville was built in '83 for HRH Prince Sulaiman of Selangor at a cost of £105,000. The gold crest atop its radiator grille was crafted by Garrad & Co.

#### 8 LANCIA

This misshapen device was to have led to a run of 100 sports cars 'evoking' the Lancia D24, and using Fulvia running gear. The prototype broke free of its moorings en route to the '75 Geneva Salon, however, and arrived rather crumpled.



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#### 9 LIMA

Designed to go head-to-head with Morgan, the volume-built Lima was conceived with a Triumph Spitfire platform in mind but BL refused to play ball, hence the Vauxhall Magnum running gear. The body was glassfibre save the MG Midget doors.

#### 10 J72

Intended as a one-off for himself, Jankel's SS100 homage was built at his house, Westwinds, in '72. Panther would make 422 J72s (later called the Brooklands) into the '80s. Some, as here, featured a 5.3-litre Jaguar V12 instead of the usual 4.2 'six'.



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### 11 DONG-A-MOTOR/STAMPEDE

Second-generation chief YC Kim sold the majority stake in Panther to Korea's Dong-a-Motor in late '87. Parent firm SsangYong then initiated a move to a new factory in Essex, Panther being roped in to develop its work-in-progress off-roader. Plans called for the company to build cars in the UK from CKD kits that would wear Panther Stampede badging, but SsangYong lost confidence and switched all development work back to Korea.

### 12 RIO

Wood & Pickett did a roaring trade in glitzy Minis in the 1970s, so Jankel concluded that there was a market for a small, hand-finished luxury saloon. Enter the Rio in '75. Basically a reskinned Triumph Dolomite, it came with leather upholstery, walnut trim and Sundyrm glass. There was also a 16-valve Especial version that cost £9445 – when a Jag XJ12 was £7527! Just 38 were made to '77.



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### 13 SOLO

It could have been, should have been a world-beater. Instead, the brilliant Solo was just another British what-might-have-been. With a chassis laid up by former GT40 insider and Alan Mann Racing alumnus Len Bailey, plus styling by '80s leading lights Ken Greenley and John Heffernan, the original Solo was a daring mid-engined sports car with Ford CVH four-pot power. The prototype was completed in 1984, but then Toyota rather inconsiderately went and launched the MR2. At a stroke, the Solo was rendered an also-ran so it was back to the drawing board.

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### 14 SOLO 2

Three years after the Solo broke cover, Panther unveiled the Solo 2, concealing 2-litre Cosworth power and four-wheel drive beneath an outlandish body made of an aluminium-composite sandwich. Sadly, spiralling costs and political intrigue mitigated against it. No more than 25 were made.

### 15 KALLISTA

Launched at the 1982 British Motor Show, the revised Lima featured a Ford 1.6-litre 'four' or 2.8 (later 2.9) V6; out of c1600 produced, 75% were exported. SsangYong later badged its own version.

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