

ENTERTAINMENT &amp; ARTS

# Cassandra Peterson finally drags Elvira, L.A.'s spookiest icon, out of the dark



Actor and writer Cassandra Peterson, better known as Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, released her memoir in September. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

Halloween queen opens up in memoir about alter ego Elvira, troubling encounters with Wilt Chamberlain and Tom Jones, and the relationship she hid for years.

BY JAMES REED

Cassandra Peterson swears no one will recognize her. She's out of drag on a recent week night, free of the towering black beehive wig, garish eye makeup and that snug dress with a slit up to *here*. She has the regal air of a celebrity, but who is she?

"I almost got into an accident as I was looking at your billboard on Beverly trying to read the description," a stranger says suddenly as he approaches Peterson's table at a cafe in Larchmont Village. "And I almost hit somebody. Thanks a lot."

"Well, I'm very happy you're OK," Peterson says, smiling and lowering her sunglasses. "And that you didn't sue me for that."

You know her as Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, the campy, vampy horror host who premiered on local television — KHJ-TV, Channel 9 — in 1981 with her own TV show, ["Elvira's Movie Macabre."](#) Everything about Elvira is over the top, designed as a sendup of Valley Girl stereotypes with a gothic aesthetic pitched somewhere between punk rock and "The Addams Family."



Cassandra Peterson poses as Elvira, Mistress of the Dark in Cannes, France, in 1987. (Richard Blanshard / Getty Images)

*It's very easy to write off Cassandra in the horrible way that people write off somebody who's beautiful and sexy. That all fell by the wayside as soon as I saw her perform.*

— Paul Reubens

At 70, Peterson is finally lifting the veil on Elvira and putting herself in the spotlight as an L.A. icon with “Yours Cruelly, Elvira: Memoirs of the Mistress of the Dark.” The irresistible tell-all digs deeper than Hollywood dirt to examine Peterson’s circuitous path to stardom and reveal how private she has been.

When the book came out last month, Peterson immediately made headlines with the news that she has been in a relationship with a woman for 19 years. Teresa “T” Wierson, whom Peterson first spotted at Gold’s Gym in Hollywood, was her friend and trainer for several years before they became romantic.

“I was a little worried about writing about my relationship with T,” Peterson says. “I knew that my fans are going to love me no matter what. I swear to God, if I became a mass murderer, I think my fans would still like me.

“But I knew that a big part of my fan base is straight guys,” she says, noting that her fears were partly founded. “On one of my social media platforms, 11,000 people dropped off after reading [about my relationship].”



BOOKS

### LGBTQ fans applaud Cassandra Peterson for coming out: ‘So happy Elvira is one of us’

Sept. 22, 2021

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Whatever following she lost, though, was bolstered by admirers fired up by her big reveal. [Twitter went wild](#) with breathless declarations about how Peterson, who was already revered in the LGBTQ community, was now a member of it.

The truth is a little fuzzier. Peterson says she doesn’t identify as gay, lesbian, queer or even bisexual. She just happened, around age 50, to fall in love with a woman for the first time in her life. (“A hot guy walking down the street still turns my head,” she says.)

“T is a private person, and we talked for a long, long time about whether we should tell people,” Peterson says. “There was a part of us that didn’t want to, and then there was another part of me that thought, ‘Oh my God, I’m so tired of introducing you as my assistant.’ It was so embarrassing for her and weird for me.”



A fan in a mask and T-shirt with a drawing of Elvira lined up to meet Cassandra Peterson at her book signing at Chevalier's Books on Oct. 14. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

Wierson was by her side at Chevalier's Books earlier this month when more than 400 fans snaked down Larchmont Boulevard to meet their patron saint of Halloween. Clutching copies of "Yours Cruelly," with Peterson winking and dolled up as Elvira on the cover, they greeted her in T-shirts bearing Elvira's visage cast in the rainbow of pride colors, ready to embrace her as part of the family.

"It's so bizarre because it's a fictional character that we love, but we also know the real person behind it," said Eric DeLoretta, a visual artist and actor who was at the signing. "I felt happy for her and relieved for her as if it were an old friend who just came out. For someone who was already intrinsically linked to the queer community, it feels like a full-circle moment."

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ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

**COMPANY TOWN : Ghoul Crazy : Think Elvira Has One Foot in the Grave? Think Again**

Oct. 31, 1995

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Cassandra Peterson holds a copy of her new memoir, "Yours Cruelly, Elvira: Memoirs of the Mistress of the Dark," at Chevalier's Books in L.A. on Oct. 14. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

Peterson's memoir is full of heartrending stories that shaped her journey as a self-made star. She grew up with a mother she never thought truly loved her and a doting father who adored her. She writes about losing both of her sisters to addiction, watching the onset of the AIDS epidemic ravage her friends in the gay community and the bitter end of her 25-year marriage to musician Mark Pierson, who was also her longtime manager. She kept their daughter, Sadie, out of the book, though. "It's not my place to tell her stories," Peterson says.

In a chapter titled "You'll Never Work in This Town Again," she revisits in harrowing detail how she survived industry predators and accuses the late NBA star Wilt Chamberlain of sexually assaulting her in the 1970s. She was friends with him until he allegedly attacked her at his Bel-Air mansion and forced her to perform oral sex.

A story she used to reel off as gossip about sleeping with singer Tom Jones — and requiring stitches afterward — becomes unsettling when she unpacks that it was a humiliating encounter and Jones taunted her when she shut it down.



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Cassandra Peterson: “I was a little worried about writing about my relationship with T. ... I swear to God, if I became a mass murderer, I think my fans would still like me. But I knew that a big part of my fan base is straight guys.” (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

Hers is a classic L.A. story — a young woman born in a small town (Manhattan, Kan.) arrives not with dreams of being a star, but knowing she already is one. Among her detours, she had been a Las Vegas showgirl and, while living briefly in Italy, had sung in rock bands and appeared as an extra in a Fellini film.

She remembers the time Bobby — Mr. De Niro, we later learn — rescued her from an argument with her boyfriend after a Christmas party at Zsa Zsa Gabor’s house. She recalls her disbelief when Brad Pitt showed up at her door by surprise to view Briarcliff Manor, her home in the Hollywood Hills, and then ended up buying it.

Peterson pokes the Hollywood types who weren’t so taken by her charms. (“Saturday Night Live” creator Lorne Michaels wasn’t fond of her; neither was Divine, the John Waters actor and drag performer.)



MOVIES

### From the Archives: ‘Elvira, Mistress of the Dark’

Oct. 25, 2017

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In the late ‘70s, Peterson joined the Groundlings, L.A.’s influential improvisational comedy troupe, as part of a class that included Paul Reubens (before he found fame as Pee-wee Herman), Phil Hartman, Edie McClurg and [the late John Paragon](#), who helped shape Elvira as Peterson’s confidante and writing partner.

“It’s very easy to write off Cassandra in the horrible way that people write off somebody who’s beautiful and sexy,” Reubens says, admitting he was guilty of underestimating her too initially. “That all fell by the wayside as soon as I saw her perform and saw her wit and humor and her ability to make herself the butt of a joke. I was really impressed by all that.”

They've been close friends ever since, bonded by the fact that they both developed larger-than-life characters who have defined their careers. "I don't let many people call me Pee-wee, but Cassandra does and I call her Elvira." (It's pronounced Ca-SAHN-druh, by the way.)



Riley Bloch, 5, from Long Beach, went in costume as Elvira with her mom, Rochelle, to get an autographed copy of Cassandra Peterson's new memoir. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

"Yours Cruelly" coincides with Peterson celebrating 40 years of her alter ego, and not much has changed. Elvira is still Elvira — a treasure chest of jokes about her sex appeal and dimwitted wordplay left over from vaudeville. Revisiting "[Elvira: Mistress of the Dark](#)," 1988's cult-classic film adaptation of the character, through a modern lens, you'd be tempted to wonder if the barrage of sexual innuendo undermines its heroine.

"I wrote all those jokes," Peterson says, shrugging off the suggestion that they offended her. "I get reviews that say, 'All she does is talk about her boobs,' and I'm like, yeah, I know. That's my shtick, you idiot." (Go ahead and call Elvira cheap or trashy; she'll agree with you.)

Her memoir had been nearly 20 years in the making, but Peterson could never find the time to write it. When the pandemic shut everything down last year, Peterson went to work, holing up at Bricks and Scones coffee shop not far from her home.



ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

## Just in time for (next) Halloween, you can own part of Elvira's spooky legacy

Oct. 29, 2020

“People think I go to bed on November 1 and wake up in September,” she says of Elvira’s reputation as the Queen of Halloween. “But I work all year round because it’s a brand that I have to work on.”

Elvira is big business. Peterson acquired the rights to the character early on, capitalizing on licensing opportunities and a robust line of merchandise. A lucrative ad campaign for Coors beer beamed her into homes nationwide in the mid-’80s, as did the syndication of her L.A. TV show.

Her online store hawks T-shirts (“[Two Big Pumpkins](#),” anyone?), coasters, men’s boxers, coffee cups, autographed photos. [Limited-edition Elvira Macabre Vespas](#) went on the market for \$11,666 two weeks ago, brokered by her manager, Scott D. Marcus, a savvy former vice president of consumer products at 20th Century Fox. And Julien’s Auctions in Beverly Hills is [auctioning off items](#) from [Peterson’s Elvira collection](#) in December.



Not found

In honor of my 40th Anniversary, Vespa Los Angeles has created 40 limited edition custom Elvira Macabre Vespas! Priced at \$11,666 + tax and license. Call Vespa Los Angeles to order: 818-906-0350  
Pre-production model on display at 13629 Ventura Blvd, Sherman Oaks, CA.  
[pic.twitter.com/XplzXTow1P](https://pic.twitter.com/XplzXTow1P)

— Elvira 🎃 (@TheRealElvira) October 15, 2021

“The difference between me and people like William Shatner and my friend Mark Hamill is that they are working for a studio,” she says. “They don’t get the money when there’s a ‘Star Trek’ or ‘Star Wars’ item. I get 100% of the money.”

Peterson grew her brand by hustling with old-fashioned grit. The '80s were a blur as she became a favorite on the late-night TV circuit, followed by more TV commercials, albums of Halloween songs, Elvira films and guest cameos on TV shows — always with tongue firmly in cheek, and cleavage front and center.

“There aren’t many people who become entities the way Cassandra has and can keep it going for so long,” says Pamela Des Barres, the author of “I’m With the Band” and a dear friend who coached Peterson as she wrote the book by herself. “She personifies Los Angeles in that the way that she created a character is very showbiz.”



Cassandra Peterson in 2007 as Elvira. “I get reviews that say, ‘All she does is talk about her boobs,’ and I’m like, yeah, I know. That’s my shtick, you idiot.” (Richard Drew / Associated Press)

Peterson never expected Elvira to endure. Hell, she didn’t even like her alter ego all that much at first.

“I thought it was stupid,” she says. “KHJ was owned by RKO [Pictures], which had a huge library of old horror films. And a horror host was a good way to give some added value to these same old movies they’d run 1,000 times.

“Nobody was excited about my show. I was excited because I got \$350 a week. But yeah, no. I would’ve never dreamed of this going longer than three weeks.”

She has considered retiring Elvira multiple times over the years and briefly felt boxed in by her creation.

“When it first started taking off, and then it became the No. 1 show on KHJ, I was like, ‘Oh, this is awesome. Now maybe I can go do some real acting and get a real gig and have a really good TV show,’” Peterson says.

“But it quickly became obvious that you’d be a freaking idiot to go off and try to do something else. And I don’t think lightning strikes twice either,” she says. “Stick with what is working, and milk it for all it’s worth.”



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Oct. 30, 2023



James Reed

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