An Electric Car, Booted
Museum Removes EV1 as Film Gears for Release

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The central mystery of the new movie "Who Killed the Electric Car?" is why General Motors created a dynamic battery-powered auto that drivers loved, only to crush it to smithereens.

The mystery, meantime, at the National Museum of American History is why a rare surviving example of that car -- a silvery-blue 1997 EV1 sedan -- would be removed from display yesterday just as interest in the innovative vehicle seems bound to grow.

In the movie, which premieres June 30 and goes into wide release July 21, writer-director Chris Paine celebrates the creation of the EV1, a nonpolluting car that generated so much passion among its fans that drivers staged a public funeral to say goodbye. Paine also excoriates GM for halting an experiment in gasoline independence under pressure from Big Oil in "one of the biggest blunders in the history of the automotive industry."

GM, which donated the EV1, happens to be one of the Smithsonian Institution's biggest contributors. A $10 million gift in 2001 paid half the cost of the history museum's new transportation exhibition hall, which was renamed to honor the benefactor. But museum and automaker say the EV1 was removed from view with no thoughts of public reaction to the movie or the display.

"There was no pressure from GM to remove the car from display," spokeswoman Michelle J. Werts said. The museum, which closes for renovation in September, simply needed the space for another vehicle, she said.

"It's not that I picked up the phone," said GM spokesman Dave Barthmuss, who defends the company in the film. "There is no conspiracy to do away with the EV1 at the Smithsonian. There is no Oliver Stone-esque conspiracy at GM to do away with the EV1."

Paine, who was on his way to a screening in Detroit last night, was not happy that the EV1 was in the museum in the first place.

"It's so sad that EV1 is being portrayed as history," he said by phone. "It's not an example of 'failed' technology. It's an example of what the 21st century can be in this country, if we had the willpower to do it. The Smithsonian should take the car out of the museum and put it back on the road."

The story of the EV1 is a classic 1990s tale of government regulation, corporate innovation, brilliant
engineering and consumer lust for the Next New Thing.

The film chronicles how GM developed and launched a fleet of silent, aerodynamic electric vehicles to meet California's zero-emissions mandate. The shapely two-seaters with a GM logo enjoyed a brief ride in California and Arizona from 1996 until 2003, when they were taken off the market and destroyed. (GM says it was concerned about safety; others say the company wanted to head off the loss of proprietary secrets.)

Paine was one of the original drivers. The director started to make a comedy about Los Angeles drivers going nutty over cars, but the project turned serious after he encountered perfectly drivable EV1s being crushed and shredded at the Mesa Proving Grounds in Arizona.

In the film, images of President Bush and Vice President Cheney set a political tone, although California regulators set standards for zero emissions that forced automakers, including Honda and Toyota, to experiment with electric cars. Ralph Nader weighs in. So do Mel Gibson and Tom Hanks, who drove EV1s.

The car evolved from the Impact concept car developed by Paul MacCready's AeroVironment team. Every one of its 2,000 parts was unique. The engine whirred, rather than roared, but spewed no emissions; there was no gear-shifting; and drivers talk of the car's torque with awe.

The first wave of cars, including the Smithsonian's, could travel 52 miles on a charge of four to six hours; the second-generation cars used a nickel metal hydride battery, which increased the range to about 125 miles. Cars were leased, rather than sold, by Saturn dealers, with monthly costs from $350 to more than $500.

The film presents the EV1 as an answer to global warming, pollution, unrest in the Middle East and rising gasoline prices.

Instead, California changed its emissions laws and automakers could again pursue nonelectric technology. GM, which had spent more than $1 billion on the EV1, says it halted production of the vehicle because there were only 800 paying customers.

Electric-car activists contend that GM ignored a waiting list of 5,000 because achieving success with the EV1 threatened to make the rest of GM's cars look bad.

Phil Karn, a vice president for technology at Qualcomm in San Diego, drove the Smithsonian's car for two years. He leased a second one, commuting 11 miles each way to work without recharging issues. When the car was reclaimed, he says, it felt like losing a family pet.

"It made no sense to us," he said by phone. "The only way we can figure is, they built this car to fail . . . or the anti-EV1 faction inside GM won."

What bothers Karn the most is the idea that a bold new chapter in autos ended so abruptly. "We thought it was the beginning of something new," Karn said. "It may not have been the perfect car, but it looked like the beginning of something new."

GM's Barthmuss compares the launch of the EV1 with the debut of the iPod, only with far fewer customers. "We, in our heart of hearts, believe we did the right thing," he says. "The EV1 experience demonstrated to California regulators that battery technology was not going to advance further. It was only going to appeal to
a small number of people."

GM needs "extremely large numbers" to survive, Barthmuss added.

"We lost well over a billion dollars," he said. "We simply could not afford to lose that kind of money. I very much regret that people are so angry."

The Smithsonian has no plans to bring the EV1 back on view. When the museum reopens in 2008, one of the most innovative commuter cars ever will be resting in peace in a Suitland storage facility.

By the end of the month, the museum hopes to display a robot-driven off-road vehicle, named Stanley, that won the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency's $2 million race in the Nevada desert in October. The winner is a smart-wired Volkswagen Touareg.

In the museum, as in life, the EV1 is being displaced by a souped-up SUV.

"When you look around and wonder why are we in this mess these days, depending on highways, depending on oil, who's the guilty party," said curator Bill Withuhn, the museum's EV1 expert, "look in the mirror. It's me, it's you."