

## Deep south drag queen carjacking rampage

Police say suspects stole cars to drive to drag pageants throughout the southeast

by Carol Robinson and Fidel Ortega

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — A band of drag queens have reportedly been stealing cars from dealerships around Alabama to drive throughout the Southeast to female impersonation competitions, Birmingham police announced. Unlike other car thieves, they don't send the cars to chop shops or sell them at too-good-to-be-true prices; they just cruise for a while in flash and style and then abandon the cars, often near gay nightclubs. "I guess they just wanted to look good when they got there," says Birmingham auto theft Sgt. D.P. Smith.

Upscale autos have disappeared off lots in Tuscaloosa, Selma, Montgomery, Huntsville and Birmingham. Investigators have recovered about 10 to 15 cars in Birmingham and as far away as New Orleans and Memphis. Police also have the keys to at least 20 others.

"They've either gotten a whole lot more cars or they've gotten the keys and haven't stolen them yet," Smith said. "We need all dealerships to do an inventory of their keys and their cars. Cars may be missing, and they may not even know it."

Police so far have charged three men with receiving stolen property in the

heists: Decarius Conner, 18; Anthony Erby, 18; and James Hopkins, 22.

Erby and Conner are out of jail on bond. Hopkins, who is also charged with escape, remains at large.

Smith said others are involved and more charges could follow.

"Hopefully this will slow them down," he said.

"Sometimes during a theft the men are dressed as women, sometimes not, but their MO has been consistent," Smith said. "They go to these dealerships and basically just overwhelm a salesman," Smith stated. "They dazzle him."

Smith said they go in a group, with two or three swamping a salesperson with questions and requests to view or test drive cars. While they swarm the seller, another lurks behind and scopes out where the salesperson puts the keys. Then they simply drive the cars off the lot, either right then or later in the day.

Investigators have recovered Acuras, Nissans, Volkswagens, Lincoln Navigators and others. Inside those cars, they found dealership pamphlets, business cards and more car keys. More often than not, they also found makeup, women's clothing and pageant trophies, said Smith.

"It's just like a shopping spree for them," the detective said. "They take them on Thursdays or Fridays and then go to these shows around the Southeast on the weekend."

According to Troy Sellers, the owner of

Troy Sellers Honda in Cottondale, Ala., the group drove three cars off their lot in April, including a 2004 Nissan 350ZX Roadster Convertible and a 2003 Acura 3.2TL Type S.

Sellers and a saleswoman Lisa Lister said the men were well-groomed, though they noticed one of them had inch-long fingernails and an arm full of bangle bracelets. They didn't want to drive the cars, just hear them crank.

"I just had a weird feeling about all of them," Lister said. "I think they definitely took advantage of our comfortable, caring, casual attitude. They took our strengths for our weakness."

Smith said police launched their investigation about three months ago. Police tracked the cars back to the dealerships, some of which didn't even know cars were gone. But, Smith said, they did remember those particular customers.



Gimme the car, bitch: It's true — a group of 20-something Alabama drag divas have stolen multiple cars from numerous dealerships across the state.

"It automatically rang a bell," Smith said. "They really did stand out."

Detectives cranked up the heat, focusing their investigation around gay nightclubs and other venues that host the drag pageants, which led to the recovery of more stolen cars.

"They're kind of amateurs," Smith said. "They got good at getting the keys, but they were sloppy at hiding out the cars."

— Portions of this article previously appeared in *The Birmingham News* and *365gay.com*.



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