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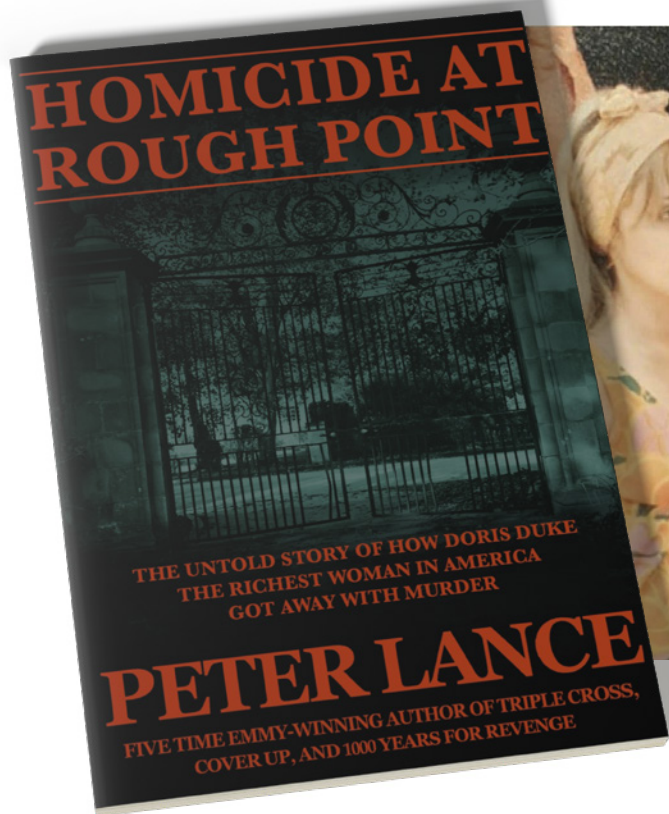
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Eduardo Tirella [RIGHT] and Sharon Tate, circa 1966. PHOTO courtesy Donna Lohmeyer



Author Peter Lance. PHOTO Carlos Cuellar

Justice for Eduardo Tirella

How billionaire heiress Doris Duke may have gotten away with the 1966 murder of her gay friend

If investigative journalist and true crime author Peter Lance has his way, the name of Eduardo Tirella will soon be as famous as that of Doris Duke, once the richest woman in America and, according to Lance, Tirella's murderer.

In his upcoming book "Homicide at Rough Point," Lance details how Newport police and Rhode Island authorities whitewashed Duke's running

over her handsome, 42-year-old friend with her car outside the gates of her Newport mansion, Rough Point, on October 7, 1966. After a cursory investigation, Tirella's grisly death was declared accidental despite widespread skepticism among many in Newport, Lance discovered.

Duke, heir to the American Tobacco Company, Alcoa Aluminum and Duke Power (now

Duke Energy), was known as vindictive and used to getting what she wanted, according to Lance. She was angry that Tirella—who curated art projects at Duke's estates in New Jersey, Bel Air, Honolulu and Newport—wanted to devote himself to his burgeoning Hollywood career. Tirella designed Elizabeth Taylor's beach house for her 1965 movie "The Sandpiper." His partner, sculptor Edmund Kara, created the bust of Taylor that is a plot point in the film.

The gruesome car crash evokes the opening of the 1962 Bette Davis/Joan Crawford classic "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?" On the day of his death, Tirella had gotten out of Duke's rented 1966 Dodge Polara station wagon to open the mammoth gates at Rough Point, Duke's 10-acre estate on Bellevue Avenue. Duke claimed she lost control of the vehicle, stepping on

the gas instead of the break, and striking Tirella who was dragged into Bellevue Avenue before Duke slammed into a tree. Tirella was found trapped under the car, dead from massive injuries.

"They closed the case and everyone reported [that it was an accident], and it became a fact," said Lance, a Newport native who now lives in California. "Individual cops who came forward all knew something was wrong, but they didn't have authority to buck [Newport police chief] Joseph Radice," said Lance. Without an inquest and relying on Duke's version of events, Radice had declared Tirella's death "an unfortunate accident." Lance obtained the original police report ("the holy grail of my investigation") and Tirella's official autopsy report, which had been misfiled in the basement of the Rhode Island

medical examiner's office for five decades—under the name “Tirella, Edmund” (not Eduardo). The writer tracked down eyewitnesses. He talked to the then-rookie cop, Edward Angel, who was the first responder at the scene, as well as forensic experts and people who knew Duke.

“My first job was as a cub reporter for the Newport Daily News. The [crash] had taken place just eight months before and the town was still abuzz that Duke ‘got away with murder,’” Lance said. It was one of those stories I always wanted to do in my career.”

“In 2016, when Trump boasted that he could shoot somebody on Fifth Avenue and get away with it, a light bulb went off. Could I tell [the Doris Duke] story? I did not know who Tirella was. I started kicking over rocks. I started with a Newport Facebook group and [found that] people were hungry to tell the truth. People still surviving, including many cops who knew a piece of the story, were willing to help me put together the whole story.”

Lance's investigation resulted in an article published in the July/August 2020 issue of *Vanity Fair*, with more information forthcoming in his book, due out in February 2021. Tirella's erasure from Duke's narrative is another reason Lance wanted to revisit the story, he said. Lance wrote in *Vanity Fair* that when Duke “died at age 80, in 1993—leaving a fortune of \$1.3 billion—her New York Times obituary mentioned him in only a single sentence.”

“Once I knew who this man was—I was blown away when I began to investigate,” said Lance. “He was a war hero. He won a Bronze Star for his service in the Battle of the Bulge. He was a Renaissance man.

He advocated for the staff and servants at [Duke's] estates.”

Lance said he was also motivated to seek justice for Tirella after interviewing members of his family. “I finally located Tirella's niece, Donna Lohmeyer. She's 73 and still in New Jersey where the family is from. Eddie had had five sisters and three brothers; he was the baby and his sister Anita was Donna's mother. Donna knew Eddie, she knew his Hollywood career was amping up and that Doris was abusing him.”

Lance said that abuse continued five years after Tirella was killed when a 10-day, \$1.25 million wrongful-death trial took place in Providence. Duke was found negligent in Tirella's death. But there was scant compensation for Tirella's survivors, despite the fact that the 42-year-old Tirella “had earned \$43,000 (\$351,000 today) the year he died and could have realized that sort of income for decades,” said Lance. Lance said Duke's Rhode Island lawyer, Aram Arabian, whom Lance calls “the Roy Cohn of New England” for his unscrupulous tactics, besmirched Tirella's reputation during the civil trial. After legal fees and expenses, Tirella's five sisters and three brothers received \$5,620 apiece.

“Donna says Doris Duke killed Eddie twice: She destroyed his body and then she eviscerated his memory,” Lance said. “She dragged the case out; she refused to pay even though she was making one million a week in interest on her fortune. The little money she paid to the family was what drove me. I wanted justice for Eddie. I'm proud I was able to give some justice to Eduardo Tirella.” [x]

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