

HINCKLE'S

He's Sure Everyone's

By Warren Hinckle

"Just because you don't think they're out to get you doesn't mean they're not."

—A.J. Weberman

It was a perfect place for a hit, just like on the road back east where they tried to get him before, and Robert Lee Lewis gulped back the paranoia when the white van came at him across the dividing line on a lonely, spiral stretch of Highway 84 in the hills below La Honda one misty morning.

There was a skid and a thud as the cars met in the mountain stillness. Lewis fought the fear rising in him. He told himself that he hadn't been living in his car for seven years while investigating organized crime and the CIA to have it end like this on a country road.

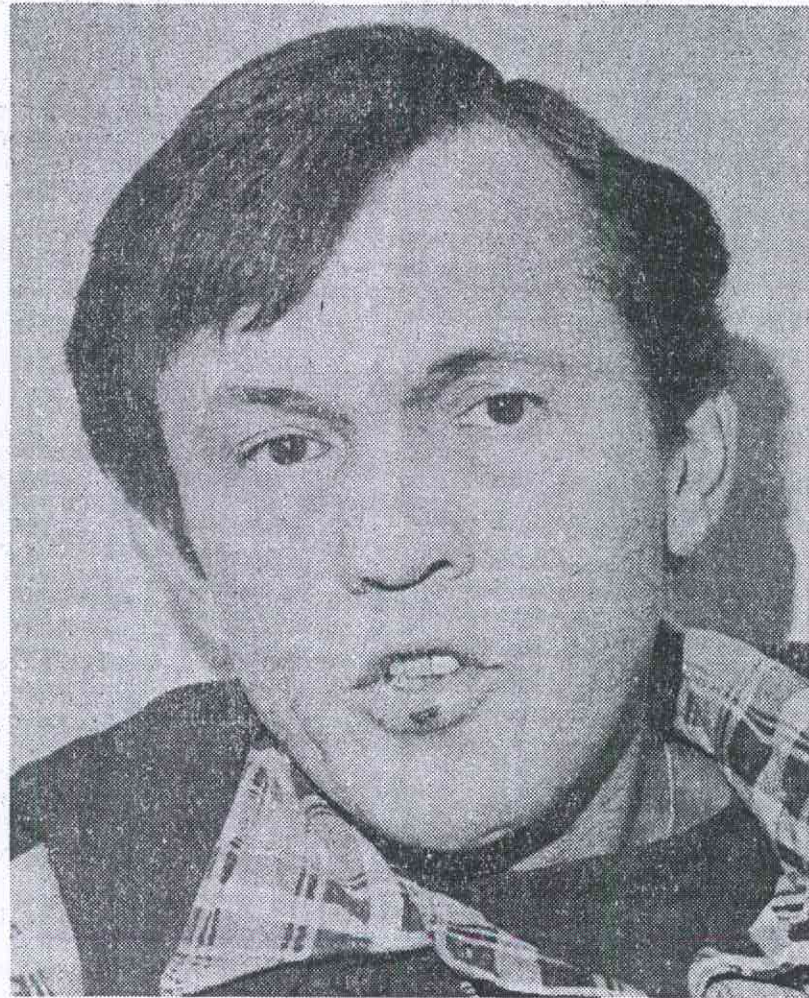
Cool your role, man, he said. This isn't a hit. It's just an accident.

Lewis got out of his car and walked over to the van. It had a flat tire. Lewis told the driver he'd get out his tools and help him change the flat.

On his way back to his car Lewis saw it: "All five lug nuts on my left rear wheel were loosened to the end. I'd just put on a new tire and tightened the lugs the night before. I hadn't driven but two miles. There was no way they could have come loose by themselves."

Paranoia embraced Lewis like a wet grizzly bear. He looked up and down the isolated road. He looked at the van. He flashed that a white van had been somehow involved in the Letelier assassination in D.C.

He dove into his car and started off like Mannix with his head below the window. He tore out down Highway 84 leaving the guy with the busted van staring after him in the drizzle. Lewis didn't stop to fix his wheel; he was



ROBERT LEWIS, MR. PARANOIA
He has the biggest conspiracy theory of them all

JOURNAL

Out to Get

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The topsy wheel got him down 84 and part way to Palo Alto on 280 before it spun off and the station wagon — stuffed like a Christmas goose with documents — sparked and sagged to a lopsided halt on the freeway. Lewis filled a briefcase to the breaking point with FBI and CIA documents and Interpol reports and some stuff from SDECE, the French CIA, and a newspaper clipping showing that Richard Nixon was in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, a day he says he was not.

He ran across wet fields until he found a side road where he felt safe hitching. His thumb got him to Palo Alto, and from there an underground railway of assassinationologists got him to Berkeley, and then to Sacramento where he took sanctuary for two days in Controller Ken Cory's office, where he called me up on the states nickel.

That was how it all began. Bob Lewis has been hiding in my basement for weeks.

This story is about what it's like to have an honest-to-God mega-paranoid person living in your basement. It's also about some of the things that have made him paranoid. As Thomas Pynchon, the novelist, once said, "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean you aren't being followed."

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"Write this down. It's important. Captain Wayne Bishop. Connecticut State Police. He was on leave to investigate JFK's assassination. They killed Captain Bishop and covered up his death, too. He knew about the connection between Jimmy Hoffa and Jack Ruby and he was getting too close

to the truth. The same documentation was taken from me at gunpoint on a lonely road back east the day Hoffa was kidnaped.

"It's important you have this information in case I don't make it."

It was Bob Lewis, on the telephone, from Ken Cory's office in Sacramento. He said the controller's people were helping him find out if the mob had tried to bump him off.

I asked Lewis how he was in so tight with Sacramento. "I helped them out with their investigation of Howard Hughes," he said.

I'd first heard about Robert Lee Lewis a week before. Alan Frankovich, a filmmaker friend who was making a movie about the CIA, had called.

He'd run across this guy who'd been living out of his car for eight years investigating organized crime and political assassinations. People in Berkeley knew him. He'd worked for the McGovern campaign. His research supposedly connected everything: The French Connection, the CIA, the SLA, the Mafia, the Kennedy murders...

"He might make a good story," Frankovich said. A short time later I was plotting to send Lewis to live in Frankovich's basement. He might make a good movie, I was going to tell him.

Lewis rang my doorbell at 10 o'clock on a cold Tuesday evening, two days before Thanksgiving. He came in and sat down and chain-talked and chain-smoked nonstop for four hours. He is short and thin and intense and so enthusiastic he burns energy like a portable power pack. He wore a ski jacket zippered to the neck and a lumberjack cap jammed down to his eyebrows. His tiny face with its stream-of-consciousness mouth and wide brown eyes was all that showed out of the bunched-up clothing. He reminded me of a kimono doll on speed.

"They've tried to kill me before," Lewis was saying. "After I testified before the Watergate committee about Nixon wrecking Muskie's 1972 campaign by letting Hoffa out of jail, the Mafia tailed my car across country. They wanted to make it look like an accident. They sabotaged my brakes outside

of Gallup when I was in a diner. A few miles later my brakes failed and I went over a cliff. I ended up in the hospital with a concussion. The FBI reports in my car were scattered all over the road where I crashed. While I was in the hospital the sheriff stole my dog. That's heavy, man."

Even though New Mexico is a danger zone for him, he says he snuck back into the state in 1976 to investigate the murder of Reporter Don Bolles. "I lost two fingers the day Bolles died," said Lewis, who tends to integrate personal experiences with epochal events. "I was choppin' wood in Santa Cruz to get gas money for my research. The saw slipped and cut the tips off my fingers. I went right to the insurance company and settled for \$7000. I spent the money on the Bolles case."

The jury is still out on that one, according to Lewis: "Both Barry Goldwater and Joe Bananas were involved. They're covering it up. Tom Sanford, assistant managing editor of the Arizona Republic, told me a lot of things he couldn't print. Right after he told me he was murdered. They said it was suicide. The last thing he said to me was, 'They're monitoring you.' And you wonder why I'm paranoid."

Lewis is a Bible-toting ex-con. He says he used to play chess every day with the Birdman of Alcatraz at the Federal Medical Center in Springfield, Mo. Lewis said he began chasing conspiracies because he "promised the Lord" he would do something positive with his life when he kicked the heroin habit ten years ago.

Lewis talked on high speed into the night. He was an encyclopedia of conspiratorial detail. He knew the names of 900 organized crime figures he said ex-President Nixon had pardoned. He could connect the French Connection to Nixon, and that ball of wax to the Kennedy assassinations. He kept pulling FBI or CIA documents out of his briefcase to buttress his theories.

"You gotta have documents, else nobody believes your trip," he said. Lewis said he had spent "thousands of hours" researching in the National Archives and the Library of Congress and working as an "unpaid volunteer" with the

staffs of Senate and House investigating committees. He was worried about the stash of documents in the station wagon he abandoned when paranoia took the wheel on Interstate 280. "When the cops see what's in those papers," he said, "they'll call the CIA for sure."

Whenever his conspiracy rap slowed down, Lewis seemed lonely and a little lost. I asked him if he'd like to come for Thanksgiving dinner.

The next day I telephoned Controller Ken Cory's office. What were they doing with Bob Lewis, and had he helped the state investigate Howard Hughes? "Oh yes, we know him," said Cory aide Keith Seegmiller. "He brought us a lot of documents pertaining to Howard Hughes estate. I don't know what use was made of them. He seemed very upset about his car and we were trying to calm him and help him on his way."

Lewis showed up for Thanksgiving. He sat between Quentin Kopp and Paul Krassner. He did most of the talking.

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I woke with a hangover to a terrible clatter and stumbled downstairs to see what was the matter. It was Lewis. He was playing the victrola. "Mrs. Robinson," that infernal noise from the '60s, was haunting the house. I thought I had given the record to St. Vincent de Paul years ago.

Lewis was sitting in front of the Christmas tree. He was darning his shirt. His hat was pulled so far down his forehead that he looked at you from the bottom of his eyes. "Morning brother," he said. "I get so depressed from reading the paper about Guyana that I put on Simon and Garfunkel and it cheers me up."

Lewis followed me into the kitchen, drowning out Simon and Garfunkel with a cappella conspiracy symphony about Jonestown. "It's a government m.o., man. Freedom of Information documents show that every left group in the country has had an FBI or CIA infiltrator manipulating it. You mean to tell me Jim Jones was the only exception?"

I gave Lewis a stiff drink — he doesn't drink much, but seems to smoke three cigarets at one time — and suggested that the paranoid blues were getting him to take everything personally.

He jumped up like he'd sat on a

hot rock. "Paranoid! Of course I'm paranoid! I've had five lug nuts unscrewed on my wheel and I've been living out of my car for seven years investigating the Mafia and I've got reason to be paranoid!"

"Man, I'm running on high-octane paranoia. I'm Mr. Paranoia."

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Mr. Paranoia did not surface at nights. He went out investigating or stayed in his room in the basement reading the Bible and cross-fertilizing his Mafia-CIA notes. That was after my wife found him sitting on the hallway floor taking the cuckoo clock apart.

Lewis would often be sitting around listening to Simon and Garfunkel when my kids came home from school. "That's a paranoid guy who's hiding in our basement," they would explain to their friends. Kids can handle anything.

Every day Lewis had a new conspiracy for breakfast. What was the significance of the Rockefeller part-ownership in the motel where the Secret Service hid Marina Oswald right after John Kennedy's assassination? Did Dorothy Kilgallen, the journalist and What's My Liner, die of an overdose of booze and pills or was it because she was the last person to interview Jack Ruby alone?

The details were all mind-boggling, and Lewis could recite them all by rote. "I can explain this in 30 seconds," he would say. Hours later I'd be screaming for mercy. A pause for breath would remind him of another story: "CIA Cubans broke into Hoover's house and put poison on his toilet articles. That's how he died..."

Peter Dale Scott, a Berkeley English professor who is a respected writer on assassinaton topics, made this assessment of Lewis, whom he knows:

"He does have a terribly byzantine kind of mind, which I think feeds his paranoia. But most of all the documents he's brought me have seemed authentic, he performs a valuable service to those interested in solving the assassinations by traveling around sharing research documents and prodding congressional investigators to look into areas they might tend to neglect."

Calls to several other professors around the country brought a picture of Mr. Paranoia as a dedicated if over-intense individual who travels the country like a conspiratorial Johnny Applesseed, planting documents where he goes. All agreed that his car — piled with years of collected documents — was the containing principle in his life, and without it he might tend to fall apart.

Lewis pined for his car with the hopeless love of the sun for the moon. He feared that either the Mafia was watching it, or if paranoia had won out and it was an innocent accident last month, the cops would arrest him for leaving the scene of an accident, and a man in his position isn't safe in jail.

I prevailed on an attorney friend, Brennan Newsom, to contact the San Mateo sheriff, who had impounded Lewis abandoned car, and explain about Mr. Paranoia. "They say the other driver has made a complaint but if Lewis comes in and explains things they'll get the drivers together to work it out and he can get his car back," Newsom said.

Lewis sat in the basement for a week wrestling with the decision. It was a paranoid's Gethsemane. "How do I know it won't be a trap?" he kept saying. He took to his Bible.

I called Detective Katsumis of the San Mateo Sheriff's. He was getting a little impatient. "I understand the situation," he said. "If he comes in, we'll work it out. But if he doesn't I'm going to file hit-run charges against him."

Yesterday Lewis bit the bullet of his own paranoia. In the company of a friend, Ted Rubinstein, an assassination researcher, he set off on the long mile to Redwood City to explain to Deputy Katsumis about those missing lug nuts and the strange and terrible things that paranoia can do to you.

If all goes well, sometime this holiday weekend Lewis will be visiting the owner of the white van to explain why Mr. Paranoia took him for a Mafia hit man. If the other driver accepts this mistaken identity in the true Christmas spirit, Lewis can reclaim his beloved car and get back trucking.

If not, he says he is ready to face the music should the San Mateo authorities bring charges of hit-run property damage. His defense will be, of course, paranoia. Me, I'm a material witness.