

New York's Unsolved Crimes

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ARTICLE II: The Colombo Case.



Post Photo by Jerry Engel



Jerome Johnson (above):
The 'hit' man?

Joe Colombo (left) at a rally a few months before the shooting.

Post Daily Magazine

legs of a young patrolman, Robert Krish, who was sprawled out on top of Johnson. Two shots rang out, leaving powder burns on the patrolman's trouser legs and gaping holes in Johnson's kidneys. He was dead.

Abruptly, the murder weapon was dropped to the pavement with a clank. The gunman backed away and was swallowed up in the crowd.

In the confusion of the moment, eyewitnesses remember seeing Colombo's bodyguards weaving around the fringes of the crowd in a daze, each with a weapon in his hand.

Police theorized that anyone with the presence of mind to drop his weapon in such circumstances had planned to do so in advance.

Soon enough, sources close to the investigation let it be known that Philip Rossillo, a small-time hood described by the FBI as a Colombo bodyguard, was the prime suspect.

Detective Chief Seedman officially denies this. "If I said it I'd have to lock him up." But a recent FBI affidavit filed in Brooklyn Federal Court states that Rossillo was photographed prior to the shooting, carrying a black satchel. The satchel contained, among other things, Joe Colombo's fully loaded .38-cal. Smith & Wesson.

The weapon, like the .32-cal. German automatic used by Johnson, was stolen and untraceable, the hallmark of organized crime.

Still unanswered are questions dealing with Johnson's personal habits—his mysterious movements that often appear shapeless and without reason.

How, for instance, did this penniless drifter manage to fly so frequently between Hollywood, New York and the Caribbean Islands without once sticking the airlines with a bad check?

Why did he go to Cambridge, Mass. three days before the shooting, returning with a girl, a rented 16mm movie camera and a pet monkey in a carrying case?

What is the precise link, if any, between Johnson and Joseph (Crazy Joe) Gallo, whom police questioned after the shootings? The South Brooklyn gang leader was said to have befriended many black prisoners at Attica before he was paroled after an eight-year term. But detectives who went to interview Gallo's black acquaintances inside Attica returned home without hearing Johnson's name ever mentioned once.

Joseph Gallo and his brother Albert are said to head a faction in the Mafia family that once received its orders from Colombo. The Gallos are said to be at odds with the Colombo leadership over disputed percentages of the gambling take in South Brooklyn.

Meanwhile, the police are still puzzled by what Johnson's motive might have been in the shooting.

And like so many other unsolved cases, it may come down at last to a waiting game between the police and the one person who was with Johnson at Columbus Circle. She is a black girl in an Afro, seen fleeing the rally scene and identified by a small powder horn necklace she was wearing. The powder horn was Johnson's.

Daley will say only: "She knows we're looking for her. And one day she'll turn up." In the meantime, the Colombo case will probably hinge on that old reliable standby of the whodunit mysteries: "Cherchez la femme."

Continued Tomorrow.

HARD-CORE pornography seldom provides a clue to murder. But that's what detectives were looking for recently when they viewed a series of 16-mm stag films in the sleazy movie houses along 42d St.

Hunched forward in their seats, the homicide cops scanned the faces of dozens of nude performers writhing about in technicolor orgy scenes. They were trying to single out one face in particular, that of a handsome black man whose overriding ambition had been to "make it big in Hollywood."

Performing in cinema sex shows was as close to the dream as Jerome A. Johnson ever got, police knew, and they wanted to find out more about the company he kept prior to last June 28th.

They claimed that Johnson was hired by rival "underworld factions" to kill reputed Mafia leader Joseph Colombo Sr. that day at an Italian-American Civil Rights League rally at Columbus Circle.

The would-be assassin was himself killed after he allegedly shot Colombo three times in the head. The Mafia chieftain still lies semi-comatose in bed somewhere on Long Island, guarded closely by police as well as "security men" from his own underworld "family."

The Colombo case is still unsolved. No arrests have been made. And little light has been shed by the police theory that Johnson was the "hit man" in a gangland style execution—a theory challenged by at least one federal crime expert and various members of the Colombo family.

To Colombo's son, Anthony, the near-fatal shooting of his father was the act of "a nut, a fanatic." New York Chief of Detectives Albert Seedman agrees that Johnson was a "psychopath." The chief, however, has stuck to the official police version that Johnson was either duped into a suicidal doublecross, or gunned down on the spur of the moment by a Colombo bodyguard.

So many questions remain unanswered today, three months after shots rang out in Columbus Circle, that detectives are still trying to patch together the crazyquilt pattern of Jerome Johnson's life and movements during his last days and hours.

Federal agents do not minimize the difficulty of trying to fathom the intricacies of a Mafia "death sentence" as it is handed down from one mobster to another. Despite dozens of witnesses questioned in the barber-shop slaying of Murder, Inc., executioner Albert Anastasia 13 years ago, for instance, the case remains open to this day. Neither has anybody ever unraveled the mystery of Anthony (Tony Bender) Strollo, the dapper

underworld boss who walked out of his Ft. Lee, N. J., mansion nine years ago and vanished without a trace.

Recent wiretapped Mafia conversations, recorded by the FBI, have been interpreted as suggesting that Bender may have been cremated near the Livingston, N. J., home of Ruggiero (Richie the Boot) Boiardo, a New Jersey underboss. Speculation has also centered on the possibility that Tony Bender, a chronic feuder with the mob hierarchy, was reduced to more manageable proportions in a car-crusher—which dropped a 3-by-3-foot cube of blood and metal out the other end.

These were just two of many gangland killings over the years to which homicide detectives say good riddance and go on about their business. But the Colombo case was different.

Since a job of murder is a way for a young blood to win his spurs as a "man of respect" in the organization, federal crime experts thought it unlikely that the contract would be let to a black man. Johnson's arrest record showed that he'd been picked up for drugs, burglary and rape, but never for armed assault.

Federal agents felt that the police announcement of a gangland link to the shootings was premature. Deputy Police Commissioner Robert Daley, who made the announcement, now concedes that "this job was contracted and sub-contracted and further sub-contracted, proving virtually impossible to trace back to the source."

But at the time, he reasons, it seemed expedient to announce even a tentative solu-

tion to the case in order to avert "race riots."

Johnson, 24 years old, emerges from interviews with former friends and ex-lovers as an illiterate vagabond and petty thief, always in need of money to further his career as a struggling "film maker."

He usually managed to "score" the money he needed through various con games. Pimping for "massage parlors" along Eighth Av. Drug dealing. Writing out stolen checks that bounced. Selling his own pornographic snapshots—or dancing as a nude go-go boy—in sleazy gay bars on Christopher St. In a typical "rip-off," he would pose for Village tourists as a struggling poet and sell his plagiarized verses for 75 cents a sheet, each stanza carefully mimeographed on blue construction paper and done up in ribbons.

In this police reconstruction of Johnson's life, one detail caught the eye of investigators. A cousin, Richard Garvin, reported that in early July, Johnson had given him the telephone number of the Italian-American Civil Rights League to use as a free answering service.

The league denies this. Also, Johnson told his cousin he was planning to film a documentary of the Colombo rally.

Police say that instead of aiming his camera at Colombo that Monday afternoon, Johnson aimed an automatic pistol and fired three shots at point blank range. Police give this version of what happened in the next few seconds: Johnson came rushing forward, his arm outstretched, still pointing the gun in Colombo's direction. Two police officers standing nearby wrestled him to the ground.

Suddenly, another hand materialized with a gun, this one aimed directly between the



Anthony Strollo: Nine years ago he took a walk...