

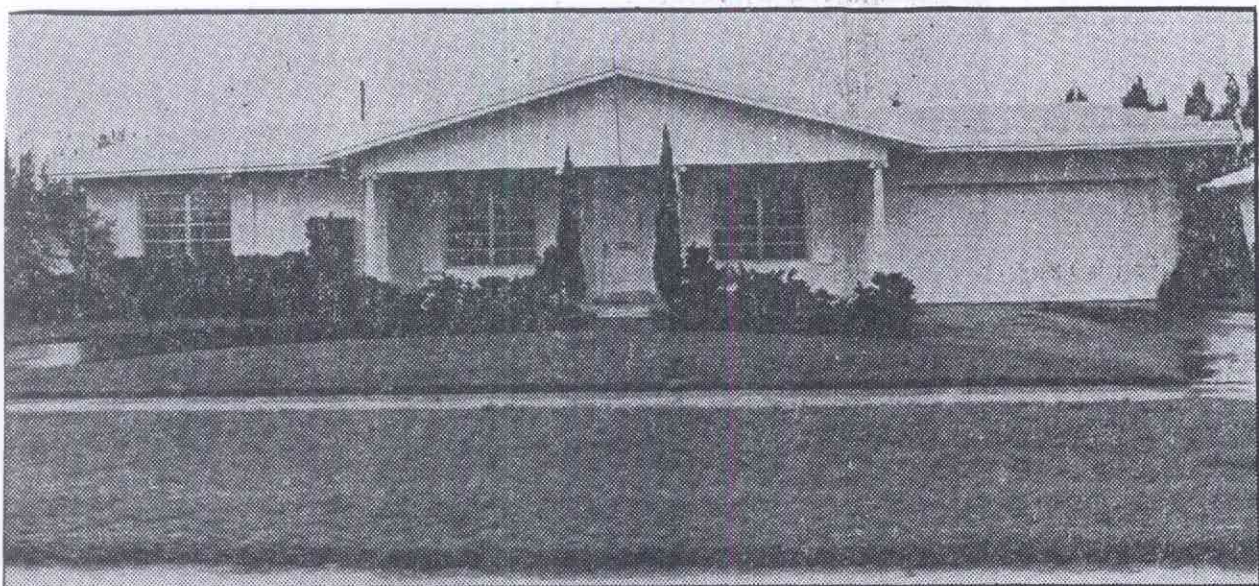
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Johnny Roselli in 1975, upper right, and, counterclockwise from upper left, Fidel Castro in '60, Sam Giancana in '66, President John F. Kennedy in '63, Dade County Police Lt. Gary Minnium and the Florida home where Roselli lived before his death.

Photos by The Washington Post,
The Chicago Daily News, AP, UPI



The Calculated Rise And Abrupt Descent Of Johnny Roselli

By Rudy Maxa

Until last month, Johnny Roselli lived comfortably with his sister and brother-in-law in a Miami suburb. A friend estimated he earned about \$25,000 annually from a gift shop he owned in the lobby of Las Vegas' Frontier Hotel.

He shrugged last year when his attorney suggested he hire a bodyguard, after the murder of Chicago mobster Sam Giancana, his partner in CIA plots to kill Fidel Castro. If anybody wants to kill me at my age, the 71-year-old Roselli said, what difference does it make? So he played golf several times a week, sipped white wine with dinner, and—until somebody decided Johnny Roselli should wind up in an oil barrel in Miami's Dumfoundling Bay—considered employment in the new gambling casinos beginning to open in the oil-rich Middle East.

In the late 1920s Al Capone and his friends chose Miami as the chic spot for organized crime figures to buy a winter home. Just across a strip of ocean was Cuba, a gambling and vice mecca. The mobsters from the north were treated like visiting celebrities by Florida press and society, while some members of the local police force began developing a taste for the finer things in life.

In the 1940s the sheriff of Dade County (which includes most of the Miami area) admitted to the Kefauver organized crime committee that, since he had become sheriff on an annual salary of \$12,000 five years earlier, his personal fortune had increased from \$2,500 to \$70,000. One of the sheriff's deputies said he collected \$50,000 in bribes in nine months spent as a bagman for Miami Beach gambling concessions. In 1948 a bookmaker's operation in Miami grossed \$26 million. It was the kind of place that made a racketeer feel at home.

For the last two years, Johnny Roselli felt at home in Plantation, a bedroom suburb north of Miami that Roselli made his retirement haven because he had family there. His brother-in-law, a government missile expert,

lives in a sprawling white home that, at first glance, resembles every other house in the neighborhood.

But it is different: the carefully curtained windows, the extra lock on the front door, and spotlights on all sides of the house give it the look of a suburban fortress. Inside, the furniture is pale blue Mediterranean, the carpet is thick white.

Roselli's killers did not ambush the house; Roselli went to them. He left Plantation at 1 p.m. on July 28 wearing a golf shirt, his golf clubs in his car trunk. He told his sister he would be home for dinner. That afternoon or evening he was killed, probably by suffocation, perhaps after being tortured—early reports said his legs were broken. Heavily chained, Roselli was stuffed in a 55-gallon oil drum and dumped into the ocean.

His brother-in-law found Roselli's silver-colored 1975 Chevrolet Impala several days later, parked at the Miami International Airport.

Ten days after Roselli's disappearance something went wrong. The oil drum that was meant to keep his death a secret floated to the surface of Dumfoundling Bay, buoyed by the gases of Roselli's decaying body.

The holes in the side of the drum and the placing of his Chevrolet at the airport convinced investigators his corpse was meant never to be discovered; history was supposed to record that dapper Johnny Roselli, facing deportation proceedings that the government had threatened off and on for years, decided to disappear on an airplane flight to who-knows-where.

"Cutting up and disposing of bodies is not necessarily new to our department," says the man who is directing the search for Roselli's killers. Lt. Gary Minnium, head of the Dade County homicide squad, is a well-muscled man with an aquiline nose that separates a pair of hard blue eyes. On the pale green wall of his bare office is a small card that reads "DYNAMITE—DON'T SHAKE ME UP."

He and another police officer recount the solving of some of Dade County's more brutal murders with

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ROSELLI, From L1

the enthusiasm of two football players recalling their favorite bowl games. The headless, handless body that floated into a Miami canal last month reminded Minnium of that other, similarly mutilated body that turned up last December. And who can forget the man who got angry with his roommate, sliced him up and tossed the parts along a highway?

As it turned out, Roselli's wasn't the first body to float into the annals of Miami crime in a drum, Minnium says. Ten years ago a lovers' quarrel resulted in a man stuffing his girl friend into a drum, filling it with cement and Aqua Velva shave lotion. The drum

was found resting against a dike and justice was eventually done.

Minnium is not pleased by such violent antics.

"We don't appreciate people committing murder and dumping a body in our county, regardless of who the people are, but especially if it's organized crime," Minnium says.

His department handled 168 homicides last year and boasted an 85 per cent "clearance record." As of July, 1976, the percentage was even higher, standing at about 92 per cent.

If Charles Zatrepaek and Jullo Ojeda have anything to say about it, Roselli's killing is not going to diminish those percentages. Both men are 28-year-old homicide detectives who

vow with a schoolboy's sincerity that they won't rest until Roselli's murder is solved. In the last four weeks, with the help of Washington agencies, Zatrepaek and Ojeda have reconstructed Roselli's life in hopes of understanding his death. For the third time in eight years of marriage, Zatrepaek worked out of town on his wedding anniversary; because of the "awesomeness" of this case, Ojeda spent his Labor Day holiday at work.

"Maybe 10 years from now," Ojeda says, "I want someone to look at my file and say, 'Hey, he talked to everybody.' And maybe he'll hear something and BANG! that's the arrest!"

That Johnny Roselli was destined to walk on the dark side of life never seemed in doubt. As a teen-ager in Boston, when his name was Filippo Sacco, Roselli was a runner for the numbers racket. He helped his stepfather burn down his home for the insurance money. He was arrested at age 22 for stealing about \$25 from someone. Then he changed his name and left for Chicago.

It would be 40 years until, in the late 1960s, Johnny Roselli would see his mother again, though he sent money to his family through an intermediary in Chicago so his sisters could attend college.

By the late 1920s Al Capone was well established in Chicago. Newspapermen, politicians and cops were on the Capone payroll and a young man with Roselli's street savvy had little trouble finding suitable employment; he hired on as a rumrunner with the Capone gang. At age 26 Roselli was arrested for selling morphine to an undercover agent. He was acquitted because, after Roselli's arrest, no one could seem to find the arresting officer or informant in the case. They still haven't been found.

In the mid-1930s Roselli, by now a mature and charming man, lucky with

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women, friendly with men of money, moved to Los Angeles. He wore hand-tailored suits and, by all accounts, was easygoing, mild-mannered. He was married for a time to an actress, but they had no children. He became a close friend of Harry Cohn, the legendary head of Columbia Pictures. The two men sometimes vacationed together and Roselli always seemed to know how to place a bet should Cohn care to wager on a horse.

According to Bob Thomas' biography of Cohn, "King Cohn," the movie mogul once offered Roselli a job as a producer. (In his book, Thomas disguised Roselli's identity at Roselli's request.)

"What would you pay me?" Roselli asked Cohn.

"Five hundred dollars a week," Cohn said.

"I get that much from waitresses who take bets for me," Roselli is said to have replied.

Besides being a handy man with the placing of bets, Roselli purchased a 26 per cent interest in a Tijuana race-track with \$25,000 Cohn loaned him. Roselli paid him back promptly and in-

cluded a check for 6 per cent interest; Cohn magnanimously tore up the interest check.

Roselli bought twin star rubies, had them set in rings and gave one to Cohn, who considered it a good luck charm until his death. Once, when Chicago mobster Willie Bioff moved to Hollywood and began making life miserable for movie studios by shaking down executives in return for labor peace, Roselli stepped in and saved Cohn from a lengthy strike.

When Cohn refused to pay tribute to Bioff and his union, Bioff tried to halt production at Columbia by calling a sudden strike. Desperate, Cohn called Roselli who marched into Bioff's office and confronted the hoodlum who sat behind his desk wearing a hat and coat, chomping on a cigar, a gun resting on the desk in front of him.

"Listen, Willie, I don't know what you're trying to prove but it isn't going to work," Roselli told him. "This is a spite thing and you're not going to get away with it. You meet with Cohn and get it settled."

Bioff backed down and called off his pickets. After he was sent to jail for ex-

tortion, Bioff cut a deal with the government and named Roselli as a Chicago mobster who had helped him shake down movie studios. Cohn testified on Roselli's behalf, but in 1943 Roselli was sentenced to 10 years in prison. When he got out he returned to Hollywood to make pictures of prison and gangster life. But publicity about a secret appearance before the Kefauver crime committee ruined his relationship with most studios. Even Cohn refused to hire him—"The stockholders would scalp me," Cohn told a bitter Roselli.

It was during his years in the Los Angeles and Las Vegas areas that Roselli met the man who would make him a household name later in life. Robert Maheu, the ex-FBI agent who parlayed a Washington private eye business into a stormy career as Howard Hughes' man in Las Vegas, approached Roselli on behalf of the CIA in 1960.

(Another person Roselli met in that era who would later surface to talk of Roselli, Giancana and John F. Kennedy was a young party girl named Judith Campbell.)

Maheu and Roselli would later tell Frank Church's Senate Intelligence Committee the details of their plots to kill Castro. Maheu told investigators he had known Roselli since the late 1950s and, while he didn't know of his underworld connections, "it was certainly evident to me that (Roselli) was able to accomplish things in Las Vegas when nobody else seemed to get the same kind of attention."

Over dinner at the Brown Derby in Beverly Hills 16 years ago, Maheu explained to Roselli that his government needed his services. Roselli, who was born on July 4, 1905, was nothing if not patriotic. (Sam Giancana once said, "Just wave a flag and Johnny'll follow you to any canal.") Maheu recalled that

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Roselli was hesitant at first but "felt he had an obligation to his government, and he finally agreed to participate" in a plan to kill Fidel Castro. He turned down an offer of \$150,000 and even paid for his own hotel rooms in Miami. He later introduced Maheu to two co-conspirators, Giancana and Santos Trafficante, an alleged Mafia figure who operated out of Tampa.

While the strange alliance between the CIA and organized crime plotted to kill Castro, Maheu was doing someone a favor that would almost derail the project. Church's investigators learned that the CIA paid for, and Maheu arranged for, a bug to be installed in Giancana's Las Vegas apartment. Parties to the incident today offer two reasons for the placement of that bug.

One explanation was that Giancana suspected his girlfriend had another lover and Maheu agreed to place the tap to ease Giancana's worries while he stayed at work in Miami. The other theory is that the CIA was worried because the agency had heard Giancana was talking loosely about the Castro plots.

Whatever the explanation, the placement of the bug was a disaster. Maheu's private eye left the tap unattended on the afternoon of Oct. 31, 1960, and it was discovered by a maid who reported it to the local sheriff. Roselli paid the private detective's bail and eventually the attorney general, acting under pressure from the CIA, ordered that any contemplated prosecution be dropped because it could jeopardize the national security operation in which Giancana and Maheu were involved. A friend said when Giancana learned of the snafu, he laughed so hard he almost swallowed his cigar.

Today the Boom Boom Room of the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami Beach seems a tame place. Five college-age thespians star in a tepid humor revue. The drinks are weak but expensive. A sign in the window of a children's clothing boutique next to the Boom Boom Room is cloying: "Grandma, Grandpa, what did you bring me?"

But in 1961 the Boom Boom Room was a swinger's paradise, the place where big money went to talk big deals. In March of 1961, the night following Floyd Patterson's knockout of Ingemar Johansson in a Miami Beach ring, Giancana, Roselli, Maheu and a friend relaxed in the dimly lit nightclub. They were waiting for a man who was supposed to be Castro's chef. His assignment: to slip a slow-acting, untraceable poison into Castro's drink.

"As we left the lounge," recalls the friend who was with the trio, "we saw this guy—small, Cuban, with reddish hair. He was as conspicuous as a blueberry in a bowl of milk. He just didn't belong in that hotel. We said, 'Clear out, let Johnny meet him.' Sam looked at the guy and said, 'My God, I wouldn't trust him.' Then the pass was made."

Giancana's instinct was correct. To-

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day Castro is eating well in Cuba while Giancana died from five gunshot wounds to the head as he prepared a midnight snack of sausages June 19, 1975.

History has tended to make the men behind the plots to kill Castro look foolish and, indeed, some of the plans seem as silly as exploding cigars.

Psychological warfare expert Gen. Edward Lansdale, for example, hit upon a plan to convince the Cuban population that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent and that Christ hated Castro. Word was to have been spread throughout Cuba that on a particular date a manifestation of Christ's return would occur. On that date an American submarine would surface off the Cuban coast and ignite starshells which would lead the Cuban populace to overthrow Castro. A member of the intelligence community sarcastically tagged Lansdale's bizarre plan "Elimination by Illumination."

(Asked about that plan recently, Lansdale replied, "That's a crock. Maybe someone was interpreting things that way. I don't know where they got such an idea.")

After the flurry of plots in 1960 and 1961, a CIA employee named William Harvey was assigned to oversee the "disabling" of foreign leaders. He contacted Roselli but this time asked that Maheu and Giancana be kept out of their discussions. Roselli gave the assassination business another try with Harvey supplying poison pills, weapons and communication equipment to Cubans who were supposed to kill not only Castro but also his brother and another revolutionary upstart named Che Guevara. Again, no luck, but Roselli and Harvey struck up a friendship that lasted until Harvey, who retired from the CIA to practice law in Indianapolis, died of a heart attack recently.

In 1966 the FBI threatened to deport Roselli unless he helped them by informing against the Mafia. Roselli's original CIA contact, Sheffield Edwards, told the FBI that Roselli "wanted to keep square with the bureau" but was afraid he'd be killed for "talking." Later that year Roselli was arrested for his involvement in a Los Angeles gambling scheme in which a peephole allegedly was used to survey a card table at the Friar's Club; electronic impulses then tipped players to their opponents' hands. Roselli ap-

pealed to Harvey for help and Harvey recommended to the CIA that it try to prevent prosecution, but Roselli was convicted of violating interstate gambling laws. He went to jail, returning in 1974 to Plantation to do battle against government efforts to deport him.

In 1971 the CIA asked the Immigration and Naturalization Service to

"forestall public disclosure of Roselli's past operational activity with the CIA" that might occur if deportation proceedings were pursued. The INS agreed to keep the CIA informed, but at his death, Roselli and his lawyers were still fighting deportation.

"Bob Maheu must be running scared—I thought about that just the other day: 'Jesus, what's Maheu thinking?'" said another of Roselli's brothers-in-law, Peter Cardillo of New Jersey.

The public doesn't know what Maheu is thinking, whether he worries if pro-Castro Cubans are exacting retribution for sins of 16 years ago. Maheu's secretary in Las Vegas says she doesn't know where her boss is or when he'll be returning to his office. He reportedly has some business interest in Egypt, a part of the world that seems to hold some fascination for the Castro plotters; Giancana kept an apartment in Beirut and, just before his death, told a friend he had some sort of deal

brewing there. And Roselli longingly eyed the opening of gambling casinos in the land of the new oil millionaires.

In Tampa, Santos Trafficante, another of the original Maheu group, also refuses to talk with the press. But unlike the others, he did not testify before the Church committee so the public has no inkling of his thoughts on the Castro assassination attempts.

Whether Roselli's killing was one of retribution for a public or a private matter, Johnny Roselli was a testament to an era that has passed. His life, which would have remained largely unnoticed save for the Senate's CIA hearings, seemed straight from the pages of a Mafia novel: allegedly brought into the United States illegally at the turn of the century, Roselli clawed his way from the mean streets of Boston and Chicago to the relative glamor of Hollywood, Las Vegas and, finally, Miami. Along the way, a simple strain of patriotism—which impressed the CIA enough to mention it to the

Church committee—put him in a rope-dancer's position of sometimes receiving, sometimes taking advantage of his knowledge of the darkest side of government.

While some have speculated that he was killed for talking too much to government investigators, Roselli was hardly a loudmouth in the league of a Joe Valachi, who sang for televised Senate hearings on the Mafia in 1963. Fourteen years ago Roselli confided in his lawyer, Washington attorney Edward Morgan, that he had been told by Cuban sources in Miami that John Kennedy's killing was ordered and arranged by Castro, but he lived with his secret.

The day after Roselli's body was scooped from its crude coffin, his brother-in-law in New Jersey, Peter Cardillo, told me: "Down deep, in a way, I probably hope it was connected with (the Castro affair). At least then Johnny, he would have died for a cause."