

William Raspberry

The 'Street Story' of

H. Rap Brown's Arrest ^{F41} ^{Part} 4/30/73

True enough, the Manhattan Supreme Court jury found H. Rap Brown guilty of robbery and weapons possession, but it took 18 hours of tormented debate to decide on a verdict. The jurors never did reach agreement on the other charge: attempted murder.

The reason for their agony, I am convinced from published accounts, leaked jury deliberations, informed gossip and a smidgin of personal knowledge, is that the scenario just didn't ring right.

Supposedly, this political militant, whose sense of commitment struck many who knew him as fanatical, almost suicidal; who appeared to be resigned to the probability that the struggle to which he was committed would result in his death; who was never suspected either by his militant rivals or his "straight" enemies of being interested in money or the things that money buys—this "crazy" idealist Rap Brown, who managed to elude the FBI and everybody else for a year and a half following his implication in the Cambridge riots, supposedly comes out of hiding, gets together with three other thugs and tries to pull off a common robbery of an undistinguished New York bar. No wonder the jury had such a hard time.

Try a different scenario.

Suppose it's true, as they are saying in New York City, that during his 1½-year "sabbatical" Rap Brown was part of a vigilante campaign against drug dealers; suppose Brown's lawyer was on the beam when he tried to show in court that the Red Carpet Lounge, scene of the supposed hold-up, was a hang-out for drug dealers; suppose that Brown & Co. had issued several warnings to the Red Carpet crowd and had been ignored.

With that sort of premise, it doesn't

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take much to imagine Brown and his tough guys showing up—armed—at the Lounge to enforce their earlier warnings, to imagine the police being summoned with a silent alarm, to imagine the enforcers trapped into a shoot-out.

So why didn't Rap Brown say so? He couldn't because his defense was that he hadn't been on the scene. (He was shot and captured some distance away from the Red Carpet Lounge.) And although he beat the attempted murder charge, he stands convicted of robbery, and is appealing (primarily on the ground that one juror put undue pressure on his fellows to vote for conviction).

Since Brown is in no position to do it himself, some of his friends and associates are trying to circulate the "true" story of what happened in October, 1971—not because it is likely to be of much help in the courts but because they count it important to let "Rap's people" know that he isn't a common thug.

Assuming the unofficial scenario is the accurate one, it still doesn't make Rap Brown into some kind of saint; that's not what his friends want. They are perfectly willing to acknowledge Brown's rejection of nonviolence; willing to admit the illegality of what he and his boys may have tried to do that night, and willing—though not enthusiastically so—to speculate on what might have happened if the police hadn't shown up: Intimidation, not murder, was the objective, they say.

But the point they really want to make is that Rap Brown is no jive-time hold-up artist.

They'd like Judge Arnold Fraiman to know that, too, particularly as a factor in the sentencing.

"No matter what you say about Rap, no matter how many charges there have been against him over the years, this is the first time he has ever been accused of any strictly nonpolitical crime," one of his associates said.

"It may sound like a strange thing to say, but if you are going to convict him on a straight armed robbery thing, it seems to me you have to handle the sentencing as though it was a first offense."