



Above left: Gallo testifying before Senate Sub-Committee.

Above right: Gallo with second wife and David Steinberg.

Left: Gallo and Umbertos.

The life and times of Crazy Joey Gallo

By R. Marc Kantrowitz
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That Joe Gallo was certainly a killer and perhaps a sociopath did not impact the adoration heaped on him by many of New York's literati. He married his second wife in the home of actor Jerry Orbach, with comedian David Steinberg serving as his best man. Bob Dylan, in his twangy voice, immortalized him in his ode, "Joey," singing "Joey, Joey; What made them want to come and blow you away?"

It seemed that everyone, with the apparent exception of Dylan, knew the answer.

Joey Gallo was born in Brooklyn, New York, on April 7, 1929, to a bootlegger father bent on teaching Joe and his two brothers, Larry and Albert, the art of crime. It was a lesson well learned.

Known initially as “Joey the Blond” due to his hair color, Gallo soon became “Crazy Joey.” On the smallish side at 5-foot-6 and 145 pounds, he was nonetheless a bloodthirsty shark who pounced, on behalf of the Profaci mob family, on deadbeats who couldn’t pay their gambling debts and honest store owners who wouldn’t pay for protection. When stronger tactics were needed, Gallo provided them as well.

Crime boss Albert Anastasia was an early founder of Murder Incorporated and the Mafia, the enforcement arm of the mob. When Anastasia outlived his usefulness, he was assassinated while getting a shave at a midtown Manhattan barbershop in 1957. While never charged with the crime, Gallo was widely believed to have carried out the hit.

Two years later, called before a Senate subcommittee investigating organized crime, Gallo appeared as if sent by central casting, which was not surprising given his love of tough-guy gangster movies. Modeling himself after George Raft, Jimmy Cagney and a fictional mobster named Tommy Udo from the movie “Kiss of Death,” Gallo cut an intimidating figure. Clad in black and sporting a pinky ring and sunglasses, Gallo puffed on a seemingly endless supply of cigarettes while refusing to answer questions put to him by the committee.

At a meeting earlier in the office of the committee’s attorney, Robert F. Kennedy, Gallo exclaimed, “Nice rug you got here kid. Good for a crap game.”

Around this time, Joe met his first wife, Jeffie Lee Boyd, who introduced Gallo to Greenwich Village and its bohemian lifestyle. Gallo was soon visiting bookstores and associating with the counter-culture crowd.

When Profaci refused to pay Gallo monies due him, Gallo hatched an idea worthy of his nickname. He decided to kidnap the boss and a few members of upper leadership and hold them for ransom. The plan ultimately backfired, triggering a mob war that was covered closely and gleefully by a salivating tabloid press, fascinated by Gallo’s David fighting Profaci’s Goliath.

When Profaci’s men hit Gallo enforcer Joseph “Joe Jelly” Gioelli, they dumped Joe Jelly’s clothes and a dead fish at a diner frequented by Gallo. The message was clear: Gioelli now slept with the fishes. It inspired Mario Puzo to depict the scene, and others modeled after Gallo’s exploits, in “The Godfather.”

Short of money while fighting the war, Gallo reverted to his earlier extortion methods and attempted to shake down a bar owner. Rather than cave, the businessman went to the police. In short order, Joe was arrested, tried and convicted of conspiracy and attempted extortion and given a hefty prison sentence.

Sensing a changing of the criminal guard, Gallo befriended Harlem drug boss Nicky Barnes in jail and plotted a future criminal relationship, which included merging some of their respective gangs. He also railed against the poor treatment of blacks in prison.

With time on his idle hands, Gallo took up art and bridge and read voraciously, devouring books by Camus, Kafka, Machiavelli, Hemingway, Tolstoy, Balzac, Nietzsche, Ayn Rand and other luminaries.

A fellow hitman once described Gallo as “articulate [with] excellent verbal skills [and] able to describe gouging a man’s guts out with the same eloquent ease that he used when discussing classical literature.”

Gallo was released after nearly a decade of confinement. He returned to Greenwich Village and entered high society. A movie, inspired by a Jimmy Breslin book, “The Gang that Couldn’t Shoot Straight,” was loosely based on Gallo’s life and starred his soon-to-be-good friend Orbach.

While Gallo was in prison, peace had been imposed on the Gallo-Profaci war by the mob higher-ups. Joe Profaci had died, succumbing to cancer, and Joe Colombo eventually replaced him. Now a free man, Gallo informed Colombo that he wanted monies previously owed him. When Colombo refused, Gallo started muscling in on his business. A new war loomed.

Colombo involved himself in many enterprises, including creating the Italian American Civil Rights League. With the lofty goal of portraying Italians as law-abiding citizens, the league leaned on Italian businessmen to contribute to the cause. Much of the money raised went into Colombo’s bulging pockets.

The league did convince the producers of “The Godfather” not to use terms it deemed offensive — Mafia and La Cosa Nostra — in the movie. But the mob bosses weren’t happy with the publicity generated by Colombo and Gallo, preferring a low profile as they hid in the weeds planning their nefarious deeds.

On a late June day in 1971, a massive crowd assembled in Columbus Circle in New York City to celebrate a Colombo-sponsored rally honoring Italian-Americans. A black photographer worked his way toward Colombo, dropping his camera and pulling out a gun. Colombo’s bodyguards, reacting seconds too late, returned equally fatal gunfire. With the assassin dead, the police could not ascertain whether he had acted on behalf of Gallo.

With Crazy Joey refusing to stand down and end his feud with the mob, his fate was sealed. Out celebrating his 43rd birthday, Gallo, with his now-second wife and a small coterie, started at the Copacabana where famed comedian Don Rickles was performing. Afterward, Gallo asked Rickles to join the party, but he wisely declined.

Gallo and his entourage went to Umberto’s Clam House in Little Italy for a late meal. The wrong person saw him there. A call was made. Gallo never got to his birthday cake.

The above column is based in large part on a Gallo documentary and other internet sources. R. Marc Kantrowitz can be contacted at rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net.