

From mob hitman to movie extra: the story of 'Big Gangy' Cohen



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The film “Golden Boy” was released in 1939, featuring, among others, Barbara Stanwyck as Lorna Moon and a very young and barely recognizable William Holden playing Joe Bonaparte. Billed as a drama, one today cannot quite hold back some well-deserved snickering with Holden playing a violin-playing boxer. In the pivotal fight scene, Holden pummels his opponent, who promptly dies, causing Joe and Lorna to re-evaluate their lives. Joe gives up boxing, returns to his beloved violin, and presumably lives happily ever after.

When the movie was released, many New York boxing fans eagerly attended, anxious to see the Madison Square Garden fisticuffs. One such attendee was Murder, Inc. killer Abe “Pretty” Levine, who while viewing the match also saw brief shots of the screaming crowd cheering on the fighters. His mouth opened in shock when he spotted one particular ringside fan.

What in God’s name was Irving “Big Gangy” Cohen doing there? When Levine last saw him two years earlier, they were murdering Walter Sage.

Before his demise, Sage cut an impressive figure. Attractive and nattily attired, the 32-year-old one-time taxicab driver left the business to sign on with the far more lucrative and dangerous Murder, Inc.

Sage joined forces with “Kid Twist” Reles, “Pittsburgh Phil” Strauss, “Bugsy” Goldstein and “Blue Jaw” Magoon and killed when hired to do so. They also ran the rackets.

Illegal slot machines comprised one such criminal enterprise, and when they were placed 75 miles away from New York City in Sullivan County, Sage was named overlord. Unfortunately, his fingers were sticky and violated a sacred rule: thou shalt not steal from the mob. Those who did were taught a violent, and in his case fatal, lesson.

When the mob wanted to eliminate one of their own, it was commonplace for a close friend whom the victim implicitly trusted to be selected to do the deed. The one named had little choice; if he balked, he’d find himself next on the hit parade.

The Sage assignment went to his best friend, Big Gangy, a well-liked (by his friends) giant of a man who weighed in the mid-200s, spoke in a rat-tat-tat manner, and was handy with a gun and icepick.

As killers ordinarily don’t make contemporaneous notes of their encounters, what transpired is somewhat unclear. It appears, though, that the plan concocted was a common one involving two cars — the kill car with Big Gangy in the rear seat behind Sage (think Clemenza sitting behind Carlo on the day Carlo’s newborn son was earlier christened in “The Godfather”). Joining them was killer Jack Drucker. The trailing car followed with “Pretty” Levine driving, joined by “Pittsburgh Phil” and Allie “Tick-Tock” Tannenbaum.

Early on the evening of July 27, 1937, an unsuspecting, well-dressed Walter Sage, wearing a grey striped suit with a purple pocket handkerchief and a similarly colored shirt, joined his friends. A leisurely drive on the quiet and dark country road came to an abrupt end when the mammoth Big Gangy grabbed Sage’s neck from behind, choking and immobilizing him. Drucker quickly pulled out his handy icepick and repeatedly plunged it into Sage, stabbing him more than 30 times.

During the melee, the icepick found Big Gangy’s arm as the car careened off the road and landed in a ditch. When Levine’s crew quickly arrived, Drucker

emerged wiping his bloody weapon as Big Gangy shot out of the rear seat “as if fired from a cannon,” screaming incoherently and running wildly into the woods. Levine yelled out to him, “Come on Gangy! Come back!” He didn’t.

Four days later, Sage’s hogtied body with a slot machine tethered to his back was discovered bobbing in a lake. He was missing a shoe, and a single penny was found in his pocket.

Whether an epiphany — along with the icepick — hit Big Gangy, or guilt over offing his best friend, or the realization that sometime down the line his number would be called, he disappeared.

When Pittsburgh Phil somehow heard rumblings that Big Gangy landed in California, he sent hitman Sholem Bernstein to pay him a murderous visit. According to the somewhat improbable tale Bernstein later weaved, “I went to California to kill Big Gangy. But I didn’t kill him. I got Big Gangy a job as an extra in the movies. I had connections out there.”

Whether a fanciful tale or not, Big Gangy indeed found himself in Hollywood. While the wisdom of someone on the lam electing to keep a low profile by appearing in movies is questionable, that is precisely what happened. Changing his name to Jack Gordon, Big Gangy entered show business. After being outed by his appearance in “Golden Boy,” and with Pretty and Tick Tock flipping and joining others available to testify, Big Gangy was arrested on the set of an Errol Flynn movie in which he was appearing.

He was whisked back to upstate New York to stand trial. The witnesses against him consisted primarily of his former cronies. At one point, with Levine on the stand, Big Gangy broke down, wailing and sobbing and so loudly proclaiming his innocence that a recess had to be called.

After an eight-day trial, the jury barely deliberated before shockingly finding him not guilty. Apparently, much had been learned about acting.

With his acquittal behind him, Big Gangy returned to Hollywood and appeared in a number of films. He ended his career on a high note as the stand-in for Dan Blocker’s Hoss Cartwright on the hit television series “Bonanza.” He even got to appear in numerous background crowd scenes.

Who says crime doesn’t pay?

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