

Jean Spangler and Dexter Benner

## **Starlet disappears while having the time of her life**

by R. Marc Kantrowitz, MLW, July 5, 2024

Oct. 7, 1949, fell on a Friday. In Los Angeles, the weather was pleasant with mild temperatures and clear skies. Before she left her house at around 5 p.m., Jean Spangler kissed her young daughter and told her sister-in-law, Sophie, with whom they lived, that she would be home very late, as she was meeting with her divorced husband to discuss child support followed by a night shoot for a movie on which she was working.

Although no one ever knows of another's thoughts and demons, Spangler, 26, was seemingly doing well. After bitter legal battles with her husband, Dexter Benner, she had finally regained custody of her much-loved young daughter, Christine, who had been born five years earlier. The dispute had been brutal, with Benner initially successfully claiming that Spangler's lifestyle and wild ways made her an unfit parent. The argument appealed to the judge, given Spangler's employment at 18 as a scantily clad showgirl at Sunset Boulevard's Earl Carroll

Theatre, whose entrance enticingly announced, “Through these portals pass the most beautiful girls in the world.”

The Florentine Gardens on Hollywood Boulevard followed, which also featured high living entertainment. In 1947, Elizabeth Short, later dubbed “The Black Dahlia,” was thought to go there before her infamous murder.

Spangler was a woman on her way up. Perceiving that the way to fame and fortune required hobnobbing with those already on that road, her employment allowed her to pursue her dream. She met wealthy businessmen and show people along with the phonies, including mobsters and criminals, who also crawled there.

In 1948, she appeared as an extra in the first of seven movies. Always uncredited, her roles typically played to her perceived virtues, that of a sexy showgirl or dancer. The men appearing in those films included some of the major stars of the day — Frank Sinatra, Fred MacMurray, Lee J. Cobb, Dan Dailey, Ronald Colman, Vincent Price, Kirk Douglas and Robert Cummings. Undoubtedly, at least some were drawn to her beauty and allure.

During her last movie, the romantic comedy “The Petty Girl,” she confided to its leading man, Bob Cummings, that she was having an affair. When he asked whether it was serious, she replied, “Not exactly, but I’m having the time of my life.”

She allegedly also told her mother, with whom she also lived but who was away visiting relatives, that she was going out with someone named Kirk.

When Spangler didn’t come home, Sophie grew concerned and called the police. Given their corruption and incompetence and the belief that the showgirl was off on some sort of adventure, the authorities paid scant attention.

Two days later, though, when Spangler’s pocketbook with its straps ripped from its moorings turned up by the entrance to Griffith Park, more than 5 miles from where she lived, they came around, especially when they discovered a mysterious note inside it:

“Kirk:

“Can’t wait any longer. Going to see Dr. Scott. It will work best this way while mother is away.”

When was it written? Who was Kirk? Who was Dr. Scott? What will “work best this way while mother is away”?

Spangler soon got her wish. She was a star, front-page news. Unfortunately, she wasn't around to revel in its glory.



The press, before the police, quickly discovered the link between Spangler and Douglas, a self-admitted womanizer and cheater regardless of marriage, with whom she recently appeared in “Young Man With a Horn.” Not even waiting to be called, he telephoned the police, first telling officers that he did not know her but in a second call indicating that he knew her in passing. Adding that he was out of town in Palm Springs, California, at the time of her disappearance, the authorities took his word for it.



The police quickly addressed the elephant in the room, that of an illegal abortion, common at the time, albeit often deadly dangerous, for those in show business wishing to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. That she told some friends that she was indeed pregnant confirmed officers' suspicions. Despite identifying several “Dr. Scotts,” no connection could be made to the one named in the note.

Kirk Douglas

Adding to the questions raised but never satisfactorily answered were the falsehoods Spangler told Sophie when she left. As it turned out, Spangler had neither a photo shoot that night nor, per Benner, a meeting with her former husband. He did, however, swoop in and take Christine once Spangler was out of the picture.

Heik,  
Can't wait any longer,  
Going to see Dr. Scott.  
It will work best this  
way while no one is  
away.

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When Spangler's mother, Florence, sought custody and visitation with her granddaughter, Benner and his new wife fled with the child to Florida and oblivion, far from Florence and the jurisdiction of the California courts.

Spangler's club contacts with two mobsters, "Little Davy" Ogul and Frank Niccoli, drew scrutiny. Under indictment for conspiracy, both disappeared around the same time as Spangler. While some witnesses placed the three together, perhaps they were more likely killed on orders of crime boss Mickey Cohen, fearful that the two might flip.

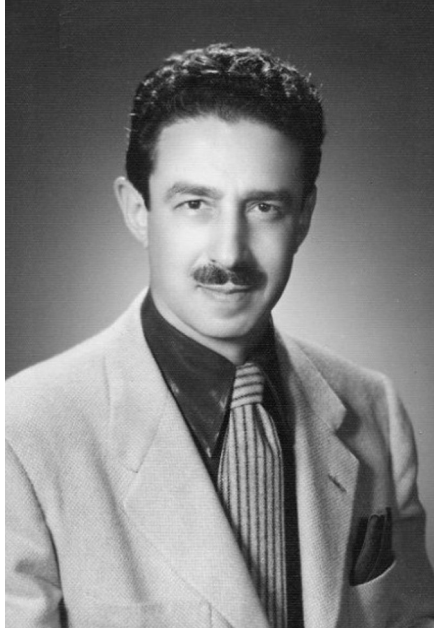
No arrests were ever made, and no leads came to fruition. As in many similar cases, sightings from various sources came but never panned out. One such spotting came via radio personality Al "The Sheik" Lazaar, who, tape recorder in hand, sought out personalities out on the town late at night.

At 2:30 a.m. on Oct. 8, he reportedly saw Spangler arguing with two men at their table in a restaurant on Sunset Strip. When he approached, he was waved



away. The manager of the restaurant also reported seeing her earlier that evening with a man in his early 30s.

Later that night, a gas station attendant pumped gas for a man driving a car with a woman who matched Spangler's description. As the car departed, the woman mouthed to the attendant, "Have the police follow this car!"



George Hodel

Decades later, former Los Angeles police homicide Detective Steve Hodel matched the descriptions of Spangler and the driver and make of the car to that of his late father, George. The younger Hodel concluded that his father murdered Spangler — and the Black Dahlia and others. Hodel noted the similar appearances of Spangler and Short; that Spangler's pocketbook was found a quarter-mile from where George Hodel lived; that he was a viable suspect in two other murders of women at the time; and, as a physician, he was one of a group who performed abortions for the rich and famous as well as girlfriends of police officers.

One member of that group, Dr. Eric Kirk, was arrested shortly before Oct. 7. Was he the Kirk mentioned in the note, the one who was going to perform the abortion but was waylaid when arrested? (But why would the note refer to Dr. Kirk by his last name only?)

With him out of the picture, did Spangler then decide to go to Dr. Scott, perhaps an alias of a man who might well use aliases, Dr. George Hodel? And what of the memory of Steve Hodel's older brother Duncan, who recollected their father saying that he was dating "a gorgeous actress-type, Jean"?

Spangler's story has no ending, just a long list of questions and suppositions likely never to be answered. Was Kirk, the movie star with a seemingly lame alibi, who described himself in his 1988 autobiography as a "sonofabitch, plain and simple," involved?

How about Benner, her former husband, who had the most to gain from Spangler's disappearance? Or some mobsters with whom she fatally crossed paths? Or did she succumb to a botched abortion?

And what of the pocketbook with its ripped straps? Torn during a struggle? Thrown from the window of a car?

Was she indeed the person seen by Lazaar and the gas station attendant? And what of Dr. George Hodel, an uncharged suspect in many murders? Or just maybe, someone not even tangentially involved in her life with whom she had a deadly encounter?

There are only questions, no solutions with a simple conclusion: In the end, Spangler got what she craved as an aspiring actress: attention and notoriety.

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