

Did 'Son of Sam' really act alone?

It isn't just family members who are still haunted by the Son of Sam -- so are some of the original detectives who wonder, even now, if there's something or someone they missed. Now Dateline has learned one police department has never officially closed the Son of Sam case.



Serial killer David Berkowitz, known as Son of Sam is shown during Feb. 22, 1979 interview at Attica Prison, N.Y.
AP File

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By John Hockenberry

In August of 1977, the world got a glimpse at the Son of Sam, David Berkowitz, under arrest and on parade, claiming he killed six people and wounded seven. The demon of the decade had turned out to be a humble looking, chubby smiling man, a postal worker. This lone gunman was behind a whole city's reign of terror, and the city could now move on -- unless of course, the New York Police Department's lone gunman was just a theory, and wrong.

What most don't know about the Son of Sam case is that from the beginning, not everyone bought the idea that Berkowitz acted alone. On the list of skeptics, police who worked the case, even the prosecutor from Queens, where five of the shootings took place. In addition, Berkowitz himself, in a little known interview done years after the killings, claimed there were other shooters, naming names.

But perhaps most surprising is what Dateline recently learned, that the arrest of David Berkowitz didn't actually close the Son of Sam case. In Berkowitz's home town it is still not officially closed.

The official story

It was back in the 1970s, the best of times and the worst of times, full of wisdom and foolishness. The city's season of disco lights would give way to darkness. It all started early on the morning of

July 29, 1976, outside a Bronx apartment building. In what seemed like an isolated killing, an 18-year-old woman was shot dead as she sat in a car with a girlfriend.

On Oct. 23, eight miles away, in different part of New York City, the borough of Queens, Carl Denaro was riding with his date, looking for a place to park. The shooter crept up behind the car.

Carl Denaro: “And next thing you know there was glass all over. I felt the car exploded. Later on I found out I was shot.”

There was no apparent relationship between the shootings. A month later, on the night of Nov. 27, 1976, again in Queens, two young girls were sitting on a front porch. A man approached, asked for directions, then pulled out a gun and fired. Both girls were seriously wounded.

Still, with three shootings in two different parts of the city, no connection was made by the police. Two months later in January 1977, Christine Freund was sitting with her fiancé in a car parked near a train station in Queens. Three shots hit her from behind, killing her.

Just a block away and a little more than a month later in March, another woman was shot in the face as she walked home from college. She died instantly.

Police worked the crime scenes independently, but it was ballistics that first saw a pattern, theorizing that there was one thing in common: a gun, a 44-caliber bulldog revolver. One gun and five shootings suggested a psychopathic killer was stalking the city. A tough city was suddenly on edge.

Soon 300 officers were on the hunt. There were also numerous, distinct police sketches compiled from statements by witnesses to the shootings. A national wanted poster blazed across the network news.

In April 1977, the killer struck again, this time in the Bronx. Suddenly the nameless monster who had been stalking the city for eight months had a name. He introduced himself in a letter dropped at the crime scene, a name that would go down in history:

"I am the Son of Sam"

Maury Terry is a journalist who has been covering the Son of Sam story for more than 25 years.

John Hockenberry: “What do you think was going through the officer's mind who first opened that envelope and read that note at the scene of that crime?”

Maury Terry: “They realized they were dealing with something very serious, and they realized that the same person was responsible for the other stuff, because there were references back to Queens.”

The letter told of being "commanded" to "go out and kill" by someone called "Father Sam." It closed, "I'll be back!"

A month later, another letter appeared, this time mailed to columnist Jimmy Breslin, who had been writing about the Son of Sam crimes for the Daily News. Those words from the very pen of the Son of Sam still burn in Breslin's memory.

Jimmy Breslin: “‘Hello from the sidewalks of New York. Ants that feed on the dried blood in the cracks of the sidewalks of the city of New York.’ He had that cadence. I remember when I read it, I said, this guy could take my place with a column. He had that big city beat to his writing. It was sensational.”

Beyond sensational, the letters contained bizarre references and symbols. The police wrote it off as lunatic ravings contributing to a city's sense of dread. And in June 1977, less than a month after the second letter, Son of Sam was back right in Queens. Another young couple was shot in their car outside this disco. Both were injured but survived. A seventh shooting created more tension, in an already jittery Big Apple.

Discos and other late-night spots were empty, and the city truly felt under siege. It was the "Summer of Sam." Weeks, sometimes months would go by between shootings, and before long it would be the one year anniversary of the first attack, July 29, 1977.

The Son of Sam considered this his own macabre holiday. In that letter to Jimmy Breslin he had asked, "What will you have for July 29?" The Son of Sam had already picked out his gift.

And when that gift arrived, it was a couple of days late and in a new part of town, Brooklyn, right here in bath beach park, July 31, 1977. As soon as the detectives familiar with the methods of Son of Sam arrived at the scene, they knew their man had struck again.

This crime scene had all the hallmarks of the Son of Sam. Robert Violante and his date, Stacey Moscovitz were shot in their car. The gun was again the infamous 44-bulldog revolver.

Violante was partially blinded and Stacey Moscovitz died a day later. But this time, there was a witness. Tommy Zaino, also parked with his date right in front of the victims' car, got a look at the shooter. There was another sketch and witnesses said they saw a yellow Volkswagen making a getaway.

A macabre anniversary

It was early August 1977 and the killer had been on the prowl for more than a year. There were six dead and seven wounded. No one could escape the Son of Sam. He was everywhere, and cops all over the city were on the lookout for that yellow Volkswagen. But the dragnet produced nothing.

All of the suspects the police had been following had alibis for the night of the Moscowitz shooting. There were confusing sketches that seemed to look like different people. Police had been concentrating their efforts in Queens and the Bronx. This was the first Son of Sam shooting in Brooklyn. They now had a new part of the city to worry about.

But then a new witness, Brooklyn resident Cecelia Davis, out walking her dog snowball the night of the Moscowitz shooting, stepped forward to tell police of a man she'd seen walk by her just before the shots rang out. Davis supplied one fact that would change everything. She told police she had watched the man she remembered remove a ticket from his car, illegally parked at a particular hydrant. The police traced it to a car owned by a postal worker living in the city of Yonkers, David Berkowitz.

Thinking Berkowitz was now an important witness, an NYPD detective called Yonkers, a city 12 miles north of Manhattan, and asked the police for some help tracking him down. Mike Novotny was a sergeant at the Yonkers Police Department. According to Novotny, the Yonkers police had their own suspicions about Berkowitz, in connection with other strange crimes in Yonkers, crimes they saw referenced in one of the Son of Sam letters. To the shock of the NYPD they told the New York City detective that Berkowitz might just be the Son of Sam.

NYPD officers raced to Yonkers, and found this car parked near Berkowitz' apartment. A machine gun was in the back seat. Berkowitz came out of his building, got in his car, and was immediately arrested. He had bullets in his pocket, and most incriminating of all, a 44-caliber bulldog revolver on the front seat.

He confessed to everything, and it was the end of story according to Jimmy Breslin.

Breslin: “When they talked to David Berkowitz that night, he recalled everything step by step by step, the guy has 1000 percent recall and that's it. He's the guy and there's nothing else to look at.”

Berkowitz was the biggest fish caught in an NYPD dragnet in years. Twenty-five officers were promoted. It was the largest number for a single case in the NYPD'S history, all on the heels of Berkowitz's horrifying, convincing confession.

What about the contradictory sketches, or the elusive yellow Volkswagon and its driver? All that went away. Perhaps most importantly, the killing stopped.

The killing stops, but is the story over?

Was that the end of the story, or just the beginning? It depends on who you believe and there are plenty of people who believe that there are nagging questions that were not settled by the arrest of David Berkowitz.

The district attorney in Queens, came to believe that Berkowitz did not act alone. And years after the arrest, The city of Yonkers reopened the Son of Sam case. Then there's the Son of Sam himself, who's not going anywhere, abruptly stirring the pot, saying there were accomplices, lots of them.

In the late summer of 1977, David Berkowitz was a gruesome celebrity without peer. Claiming a dog had ordered him to kill, he still seemed under some demonic influence when he showed up in court. But 20 years later Berkowitz wants you to believe that it's not the devil who commands him anymore. He says he is a born again Christian now, counseling his fellow inmates on the ways of the good book.

David Berkowitz: “It says in the Bible that to everything there's a season and a time to every purpose under heaven. And it also say that there's a time to keep silence and a time to speak. And this is my time to speak.”

Berkowitz had never wavered from his original confession. That confession became the official account of the Son of Sam shootings. But then Berkowitz changed his story. He declined to speak to Dateline NBC, but in 1997, he spoke with someone who he had been in contact with for years, a dogged journalist with his own near obsession with the Son of Sam case.

Around the time Berkowitz began serving his life sentence, Maury Terry began devoting his life to the Son of Sam case. He wrote a 500-page book outlining a theory of a vast conspiracy that reaches from coast to coast, connecting social outcasts with the politically powerful. Some of Terry's claims may seem outlandish, but what of the core of his theory, that David Berkowitz did not act alone and did not shoot all of the Son of Sam victims? It's a question Berkowitz had a chilling answer for back in 1997.

He had called Stacey Moscowitz a whore in court back in 1977. Now he said that her killing was a team effort and he a minor player. He claimed he was a lookout not the triggerman, one of many, part of a group of Son of Sam killers, a group he first came in contact with two years before Son of Sam crimes.

Berkowitz: “I had gone to a party in the neighborhood and I met some interesting people there.”

Interesting, Berkowitz claimed, because they were into Satanism.

Berkowitz: “We began to talk about the occult. It just came up.”

He said he would go with the group to a park in Yonkers, Untermeyer Park.

Berkowitz: “And there'd be people getting high and going through some rituals. They were into the occult. I met some people there who said that they were witches. There were animal sacrifices and other dark and ugly things happening.”

He said he got caught up in the rituals. The group, he said, began to take over his very soul.

Berkowitz: “It was a recruitment process. A slow but methodical recruitment process.”

But Berkowitz said it was about more than animal sacrifice.

Berkowitz: “They were into child pornography, and there was other people that were into that thing, you know, where they wanted that. And they would provide that.”

Maury Terry: “Producing child pornography, is that what you're saying? And providing children?”

Berkowitz: “Yeah.”

Some members of the group, according to Berkowitz, were plotting ritualistic murder, human sacrifices to the devil, which is what this born again Christian was now saying the Son of Sam killings were all about.

Berkowitz: “They were working with Satan to try to bring in a lot of chaos.”

Terry: “Are you telling me that one of those attempts at bringing on chaos was the Son of Sam murders?”

Berkowitz: “Well, that-- yes. Definitely. “

But is there anything definite in this seemingly outlandish story, any facts or recollections that might support the theory of a 20-year-old satanic conspiracy as an explanation for the Son of Sam murders?

James Rothstein worked in a vice unit in Manhattan. He recalls leads he picked up years before the Son of Sam killing, a nefarious ring involved in pedophilia, and child pornography.

Rothstein: “We got information that children were being used and in particular there was something strange going on in Van Courtland park and Untermyer park.

Untermyer Park, in Yonkers is the same place Berkowitz said the group he ran with was centered. There Rothstein says, he first found evidence of animal sacrifice.

Rothstein: “And it came down that somebody was murdering German shepherds.”

Could this have been some kind of boardroom for a Son of Sam conspirators, the place where they planned their brutal crimes?

Rothstein: “And here was this building that had all these Satanic ritualistic drawings and stuff of that. So I had a pretty good idea I was looking at some type of a cult activity.”

Rothstein found this bizarre place five years before the first Son of Sam shootings. Reports of Satanic activity offer a possible motive for the Son of Sam killings - and a motive is something that the NYPD has never come up with even though they arrested Berkowitz. Cult activity also suggests the possibility of a murder conspiracy, something Maury Terry says there was already evidence for.

Terry: “Makes a hell of a lot more sense than thinking some guy listened to a talking dog and went out and shot people. It's ridiculous.”

David Berkowitz does admit to being a part of all eight shootings.

Berkowitz: “I was there, at all of them. And in the area, and scouting, and I had a part. I'm responsible for my involvement in those things, and, you know, definitely guilty.”

And Maury Terry says the case for a conspiracy really takes off with a closer look at the Son of Sam's last stand July 31, 1977, with the shooting of Stacey Moscovitz and Robert Violante. According to Berkowitz new version of events, he said he did not pull the trigger.

Terry took us back to the scene of the shooting. In one of the cars was eyewitness, Tommy Zaino. He gave police a description that would not suggest the pudgy, dark curly-haired David Berkowitz, that Zaino could still recall years later, mentioning “strawy hair... long, all out of shape, light brown hair, light blonde.”

Witnesses also described different automobiles at the scene, including a description of a getaway driver in a yellow Volkswagen. Because of those witnesses, police had been looking for a yellow Volkswagen.

Yet, Berkowitz owned a Ford Galaxy. Was he aware of other cars?

Terry: The shooter escaped in that yellow VW?”

Berkowitz: “He drove off, yeah.”

Berkowitz diagramed his escape route for Terry and, he claimed, the routes of his accomplices. He named some of them, reluctantly. But Maury Terry says if you want names, all you have to do, is look at the Son of Sam's letter to Jimmy Breslin. Terry says the NYPD dismissed much of the letter as the lunatic ravings of a lone killer, but he says some names mentioned in the writings point to real people, for instance, John Wheaties.

Terry: “Well, John Carr's nickname was Wheaties.”

John Carr lived in a house right behind David Berkowitz' apartment. Carr's father was a man named Sam. New York police had an explanation for this. Berkowitz had allegedly been obsessed with the Carr's dog and may have even shot the animal. But Terry says there's a lot more to it. Carr's brother was named by Berkowitz as one of the so-called "interesting people" who made up the Satanic cult.

Berkowitz said the Carr brothers actually took part in the killings, that Michael Carr was the gunman at the disco shooting in Queens.

Michael Carr died in a traffic accident on Manhattan's West Side Highway. Berkowitz said it was Michael's brother John Carr, who was the gunman at another of the Queens shootings.

Maury: “Is it a fact that the shooter that night was John Carr?”

Was he the gunman that night?

Berkowitz: “Yeah.”

Does anything support these claims? How about the sketches? During the investigation, witnesses frequently seemed to be describing different people. But could there be another explanation for the different hairstyles? In his interview with Terry, Berkowitz claimed he was the gunman at only two of the eight shootings attributed to the Son of Sam, and that he killed three of the six victims, all in the Bronx. The witness sketch from the first Bronx shooting bears a clear resemblance to Berkowitz. The sketches from other shootings, where Berkowitz claimed someone else pulled the trigger, indeed look like someone else. They come from the shooting Berkowitz said John Carr committed.

John Carr is also dead, of gunshot wounds he sustained in North Dakota in 1978. Police came to believe it was a probably a homicide.

Of course you might say that the death of both Carr brothers conveniently supports the theory of a convicted murderer. Berkowitz would not name any other accomplices. He claimed some of them are still alive. His family he says would be at the mercy of his former satanic cohorts if he named them.

This wouldn't be the first time a criminal has blamed a cult for crimes he committed, even though in Berkowitz's case he had reason to be concerned about his own safety. His throat was cut by an inmate in 1979. But this is not just a convict's wild theory to shift guilt away from himself. There are other voices who believe this case should never have been closed.

All the tantalizing theories about satanic cults behind the Son of Sam case are worth next to nothing in court without solid evidence. Yet in the late 1970s the Queens D.A., a man with five of the shootings in his jurisdiction, who would have loved to say case closed, instead challenged the NYPD'S lone gunman theory.

Santucci: "I believe David Berkowitz did not act alone, that in fact others did cooperate, aid and abet him in the commission of these crimes. In fact, it has crossed my mind that this 44-caliber pistol was passed around among a number of people."

Santucci is retired and did not respond to our attempts to contact him. But his former press secretary now historian Tom McCarthy did sit down with us. He says his ex boss, even though convinced by the evidence of a conspiracy, never had enough to take it to court and put one of the NYPD'S most famous cases on trial, but he felt obliged for the public's interest to keep the case open.

Eventually, the Queens da did close the Son of Sam case. The city and the nation had moved on. But not ex-Yonkers cop Mike Novotny.

Hockenberry: “They got the guy, he's under arrest, city's safe, everybody go home. What was wrong with that?”

Mike Novotny: “At the time, I didn't think anything.”

Hockenberry: “And then?”

Novotny: “And then I began to realize that there may be more people involved in this.”

The Yonkers Police Department would not comment on our story, but after we sent them a Freedom of Information request, they sent us a letter, which confirms that an investigation was started in 1996, and has not been closed to this day.

Hockenberry: “Give me an idea, a ballpark number of people who you thought strongly might have been involved.”

Novotny: “Oh, I'd say half a dozen.”

Since his confession, Berkowitz has never testified or been cross-examined about his version of events in a trial. Some of the people closest to the tragedy, after all this time, yearn for closure. Dateline contacted three parents of Son of Sam victims. While they remain bitter about the man locked away for killing their loved one, all three told us they now think Berkowitz probably did not act alone. Even a man who took a Son of Sam bullet, Carl Denero, agrees.

Carl Denero: “There's no way that David Berkowitz did all the shootings. I personally think it was a cult. I don't know that for a fact. But I am convinced that -- and no one can unconvince me -- that more than one person was involved.”

And as for columnist and Son of Sam pen-pal Jimmy Breslin, he's heard it all before and doesn't buy any of it. And it's not just Jimmy Breslin. A former FBI profiler who spent hours interviewing Berkowitz told us he was convinced Berkowitz acted alone, was an “introverted loner, not capable of being involved in group activity.”

The case in Yonkers has never been brought before a grand jury. The New York City police would not comment on any aspect of the Son of Sam case, but have never wavered from their belief that a lone gunman was the Son of Sam.

Berkowitz in his 1997 interview with Maury Terry seemed to shine a light on Terry's conspiracy theory, but he declined to elaborate on his allegations, and would not grant an interview to Dateline. So we're left with these last on-camera words from David Berkowitz.

Berkowitz: “It was a time of foolishness for me, a time of spiritual darkness, a time of a lot of confusion.”

It is like the confusion which continues to surround this case, which Berkowitz himself has helped to perpetuate, and which apparently he has no intention of clarifying.

Berkowitz: “I made a lot of bad choices. I made a lot of bad mistakes. I'm truly sorry for the lives that were destroyed. I'd like to say that I'm very, very sorry.”

But not sorry enough to either testify before a grand jury and move the case forward or close it forever by admitting once and for all, he was in fact the lone gunman responsible for the Son of Sam shootings.

David Berkowitz is serving six consecutive terms of 25 years to life. In June, he was denied parole, for a second time. The review is automatic under New York state law. Berkowitz himself, in a letter he wrote two years ago, said he has no interest in parole, and can give no good reason why he should even be considered. 🦋

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