

New probes may spread blame in 'Son of Sam' killings

By Bill Warner

David Berkowitz, the postal worker from Yonkers who said he terrorized New York City as the Son of Sam 20 years ago, was frightened himself last week by a television series that promised to solve the case once and for all.



David Berkowitz

He was arrested outside his apartment on Pine Street in Yonkers, was sentenced to life in prison and is serving time at Sullivan County Correctional Facility in Fallsburg.

When he got nervous about his role in the series, which appeared last week on four editions of WABC-TV's 11 p.m. news, Berkowitz called the man who has almost single-handedly kept the Son of Sam story alive, freelance writer and TV producer Maury Terry.

"Don't worry. It will pass," Terry told Berkowitz. "It'll be fine. It'll be fine."

Terry, who said WABC a three-hour videotaped interview with Berkowitz shot in May, reminded him that television in the prison are turned off at 11 p.m. So neither Berkowitz nor the other inmates saw the series. That's important, because Berkowitz had his throat cut by another inmate 15 years ago and still fears being labeled a snitch.

Terry also told Berkowitz that developments in the case have made him less of a "nut" of the investigation and more of a "spoke in the wheel." Terry said it would eventually be established that Berkowitz pulled the trigger on only two of the eight shootings, and that guilt in the Son of Sam case will be spread among other members of the satanic cult that he and the WABC series accuse.

Terry, who has spent 20 years working to prove the shootings were part of a national conspiracy to create murderous mayhem, said he thought he was on the verge of getting the alleged masterminds indicted. He and WABC said two law enforcement agencies are investigating the Son of Sam case and related crimes.

One of those agencies, they said, is the Yonkers Police Department. Terry was hoping Yonkers would make a public statement confirming the WABC report that an "ongoing investigation has uncovered corroborating evidence of a conspiracy."

But Police Commissioner Donald Christopher did not respond, and other key officials in the Detective Division refused to confirm or deny the report.

Terry also said the NYPD began to look into the murder of photog-

rapher Ronald Sissman in Greenwich Village on Oct. 30, 1977. Sissman said Terry was killed because he filmed the last of the Son of Sam shootings, the murder of Stacy Moskowitz in Brooklyn.

According to this scenario, photographer and alleged cultist Robert Mapplethorpe hired a man now imprisoned for bank robbery in Alabama to arrange the murder of Sissman and retrieve the film of the Moskowitz shooting. The convict, Jesse Turner, said he pulled it off, and he appeared briefly in the WABC series. He was brought from his prison cell to New York City for extensive police interviews last year, Terry said.

Mapplethorpe died of AIDS in 1983.

When someone inside the NYPD realized the Sissman murder was related to the Son of Sam case, Terry has alleged, high-ranking police officials "shut down" the investigation.

That story also was told by an unidentified "federal official" who appeared on camera with his face hidden and his voice altered. However, WABC news director Bart Feder said the station confirmed the identity and credibility of the official.

William Allee, the NYPD's chief of detectives, confirmed part of the story.

"We did have an investigation by our cult case squad last year," Allee said, adding that it began in April 1986 and ended this year. "Detectives interviewed Turner, and he gave them some information. He identified two individuals, we spoke to those people and they retained attorneys. But we never had enough evidence to make an arrest."

Allee denied that there was an NYPD cover-up.

"Every person closely involved in the Son of Sam case has long retired. No one here is in a position to pull any strings to protect anyone's reputation. But we have our work on development of facts, not on people's theories that are unsubstantiated," Allee said.

Allee also said he thought the Sissman murder was drug-related, and that the Sissman investigation did not shed significant new light on the Son of Sam case.

Old stories

There are several other problems with the series, including that much of it consists of Berkowitz confirming theories in Terry's 1987 book, "The Ultimate Evil," or repeating stories Berkowitz told in his last on-camera interview with Terry, in 1983.

For example, in the May interview Berkowitz identified the cult as the Process, a group formed in England in the early 1960s as an offshoot of the Church of Scientology. Terry charged in his book that Process leaders arranged for the Son of Sam murders, as well as those committed by Charles-Manson and his followers.

No Process leaders have ever been indicted for homicide.

Berkowitz also repeated his assertion that there were five other Son of Sam shooters, and that two

of the murder victims — Donald Lauria and Christine Freund — were cult "bits."

Even Feder worked the point. Former Yonkers police Detective Mike Novotny, a private investigator who worked on the investigation with Terry in the early 1980s, also said the WABC series was "nothing I hadn't heard before."

Terry, who said he has a "professional and cordial" relationship with Berkowitz, defends the convict's credibility.

"You don't have to take his word, but when you find other evidence his credibility is established," Terry said.

The cult story was considered credible enough for Queens District Attorney John Santucci to reopen the Son of Sam case in 1979. Santucci also concluded that Berkowitz did not act alone, but lacking enough evidence to file charges, he ended the probe in 1983.

Mary DeDonato, spokeswoman for the Queens District Attorney's Office, said New York police detectives working on the Sissman case made a "presentation" of a Son of Sam conspiracy theory to District Attorney Richard Brown last year, but that it included no substantial new evidence.

"We came away from that presentation thinking that it was nothing more than speculation and surmise, nothing to go to a grand jury with. And that is where we left it," DeDonato said.

Still in Westchester?

The most interesting new story from Berkowitz is that the Process held a meeting in Purchase in 1976 at which plans for some type of terror campaign were hatched. The group supposedly considered a Manson-type mass murder in Westchester County, and the kidnapping and ritual murder of young women, before settling on the Son of Sam shooting spree.

Terry said he spent months trying to persuade Berkowitz to speak out in May, and succeeded through an appeal to the convict's "Christian conscience" (Berkowitz converted in 1987) and because of new

evidence. That new evidence consists mainly of the testimony of Turner and a man Terry and the WABC series identified only as "The Artist."

This person, who appeared in the series in a disguise, said he was briefly involved in cult activities in Untermyer Park in Yonkers before the Son of Sam crimes occurred. He sketched several members of the cult and identified them for police, including the owner of the Purchase house. The Artist matched this unnamed cult leader

to a sketch as he lay dead in his coffin.

Terry said it all could lead to a string of indictments — as many as 12 people, according to the unnamed federal official — and could solve murders related to the Son of Sam case. More than 20 people who had ties to the cult were killed after the Son of Sam shootings, said Terry, in many cases because they were considered likely to confess.

There are as many as 10 Process members still living in Westchester,

Terry said.

He won't say who they are, fearing public exposure will sidetrack the investigation and cause them to flee the country.

"They have got to go," Terry said. "They've been polluting the American underground since the late 1960s. How are they allowed to exist?"

The next media step will be two hour-long Son of Sam specials, one as yet unscheduled by WABC-TV, one Nov. 22 on the A&E network.

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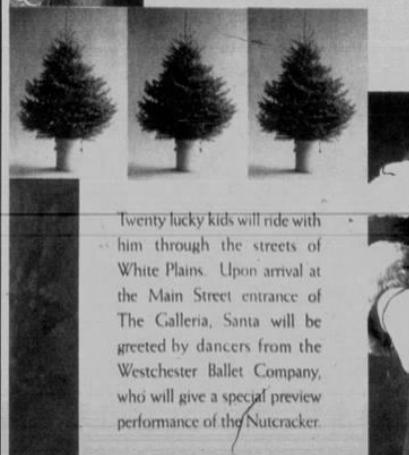
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