

Who Is Really Behind That .44? Police Pursuing Many Theories

By HOWARD BLUM

Who is the "Son of Sam"?

Detectives are actively pursuing theories that the .44-caliber killer could be a laid-off policeman, a freelance journalist, a taxi driver or a compulsive walker who roams the city day and night.

Seventy-five detectives assigned to the special homicide task force in the 109th Precinct in Queens have worked in around-the-clock shifts to identify the psychopath who has killed six victims and wounded seven others.

It is a search in which detectives have knocked on hundreds of doors throughout New York City, answered thousands of phone calls from around the world, studied countless photographs of young men in high school and college yearbooks and listened patiently to astrologers, seers, hypnotists and numerologists. It is also a search in which a detective sustained a blackeye for attempting to interview one suspect. Another detective complains that he even dreams about the Son of Sam at night, and a third spent a weekend tailing a Staten Island man he was certain was the killer.

And it is a search that has produced more than 3,000 suspects—none of whom the police, after months of work, now believe is Son of Sam.

'A Few Things We Know'

"We have a few things we know for sure," said Inspector Timothy Dowd, head of the task force. "We have a few theories. But we have no solid leads. It's all very frustrating."

The police have built their investigation on these "few things we know for sure." However, even these things become less certain or raise other questions under the task force's intense scrutiny. Among the facts in the .44-caliber case are the following:

¶The eight dates when the killer has struck—Any suspect is eliminated if he can produce an alibi for any of these dates. However, the task force is not certain these are the only times the killer has shot at potential victims. Detective Gerald Shevlin of the task force said: "Suppose he shot a couple of times and the bullet missed and the people didn't want to report it or thought the shots were a car backfiring. That's a very real possibility which knocks the hell out of a lot of our theories."

¶The gun—"The .44-caliber Bulldog revolver is our most tangible clue," Inspector Dowd said. However, this "tangible" clue has produced intangible results. The police have attempted to trace the entire 28,000 total of .44-caliber Charter Arms Bulldog Revolvers ever produced—including the 600 guns reported stolen—without establishing any key suspects.

¶Stockpile of ammunition—Detective Frank Pergola said: "We also know this guy must have a stockpile of ammunition. He's fired 32 times so far without going into stores to buy more ammo."

¶The description of the killer—Interviews with survivors and eyewitnesses, including some conducted under hypnosis, have resulted in four different draw-

ings by police artists of the killer. In these composite sketches, the suspect is a white male between 20 and 35 years old, whose height ranges from 5 feet 7 inches to 6 feet 2 inches and who weighs anywhere from 150 to 220 pounds. The descriptions are so varied that the police are now considering the possibility that the killer wears various disguises, including wigs and mustaches and has gained weight to complicate further his identification.

¶The two letters the killer has written—These letters, one of which was left at the scene of a shooting and the other of which was sent to Jimmy Breslin, a columnist for The Daily News, have provided the police with psychological insights into the killer's identity. In addition, the police are taking handwriting samples from each suspect to compare with the highly stylized lettering in the two messages. The police have used those four areas of what is known to attempt to establish the identity of the killer. Among the theories the task force is actively pursuing are the following:

The killer could be a laid-off policeman.

—This theory is favored because the victim has a knowledge of guns, fires with accuracy from a combat stance, has knowledge of neighborhoods and in one letter referred to the National Crime Information Center, a computer bank of criminal records maintained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Critics of this theory say that any veteran has a knowledge of guns and that the killer might not be firing from a combat stance but simply crouching to fire into the window of a parked car.

¶The killer could be a freelance journalist.—In his letters Son of Sam writes with clarity and follows punctuation rules, including the use of a semicolon. The possibility that the killer is a freelancer would also help explain why he has not been identified by his fellow workers who might have noticed similarities between the killer and the composite sketches. The police also believe that as a journalist the killer could freely return to the scene of the crimes.

¶The killer is a taxi driver — This theory would explain his knowledge of neighborhoods and escape routes in the city. It would also provide the killer with a get-away vehicle that might not be noticed and with an occupation that would provide both the anonymity and the flexible schedule required to plan the eight attacks.

¶The killer is a compulsive walker — The police have never established that the killer leaves the scene of each shooting by car. Detective units, after consultations with psychiatrists, are therefore working on the assumption that the murderer is a psychopath who walks about the city, a common manifestation of severe psychosis. The fact that the killer is a walker would also explain his knowledge of neighborhoods and escape routes. And a man who is a compulsive walker might describe himself as the killer did in one letter as "a spirit roaming the night." Last week the police were actively investigating a man who walked from Forest Hills to New Jersey in an afternoon.