

Roy Radin: Life and Death in the Show-Business Demimonde

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Roy Radin: Life and Death in the Show-Business Demimonde

The following article is based on reporting by Leslie Bennetts and Frank J. Priol and was written by Mr. Priol.

There was some talk about having Roy Radin's funeral in Southampton, L.I., but his mother would have none of it.

"I wanted him laid out in the city," she said, "with the funeral at St. Malachy's. After all, a lot of his friends would be flying in from L.A. and then going right back."

Flying in from Los Angeles and going right back. That was Roy Radin's world. Mr. Radin, a skilled show-business promoter at age 17, a millionaire in his early 20's and a murder victim at 33, was born into the fast track — and died there.

"I could wait in line for an airplane ticket," said Richard Gersh, Mr. Radin's press agent and confidant for a dozen years. "For Roy, it had to be a private jet. I could go to dinner alone. Roy needed an entourage. It was his way. He couldn't escape it."

Nor, perhaps, could he have escaped the shot that ended his life some time during the night of May 13 in a canyon 65 miles north of Los Angeles. "He had been warned," a Los Angeles friend said. "He had been told to keep his mouth shut. He laughed it off. He said 'Those punks don't scare me.'"

'Punks' Were Drug Traffickers

"Those punks," according to investigators and friends and former business acquaintances of Mr. Radin, were drug traffickers, probably Cubans, who supply cocaine to the lucrative film colony market.

Mr. Radin may have become involved with them, friends said, as he sought to rise above the tacky world of one-night-stand vaudeville revivals and break into the highly charged, drug tolerant worlds of Broadway and Hollywood.

Mr. Radin was a show-business phenomenon. To many, he was half carnival barker and half Broadway tout, with a vile temper and gargantuan appetites for drugs, drink, women and work. To others, he was a confused, lonely man who related to women by humiliating them.

Tale of the Demimonde

On one level, his story is a tale of the show-business demimonde — a colorful world inhabited by Runyonesque characters and those who occasionally strike it rich. On another plane, his story is a contemporary tragedy of a man driven by ambition to live outside the law and finally destroyed by the criminals attracted to the wealth and excess of show business.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office is in charge of the investigation into Mr. Radin's death. Detectives have been combing the country tracking down leads.

"It's not just the Radin murder," said a private investigator familiar with the case. "A break here could

crack open a big piece of the drug business in Los Angeles."

The known facts about Mr. Radin's last hours are these: He arrived from New York on May 12 and checked into the Regency, an old hotel in Hollywood totally out of character for a man of his extravagant tastes. He spent most of his time on the telephone. Then, around 7 P.M. Friday, he left the hotel in the company of a woman named Elaine Jacobs, supposedly to keep a dinner engagement with other people at La Scala restaurant, a film colony hangout in Beverly Hills. He was never seen alive again.

Called His Mother

Among those he had called in the hours before his death was his mother, Renee Radin Dorr, back in New York. "His voice was strained and tense, and I knew right away something was wrong," she said. "I asked him, 'What's the matter, baby?' He said that he just wanted to tell me he loved me. Then he asked me to give his love to Toni, his ex-wife, and to his sisters, 'Just in case I get killed in a plane crash.'"

His body, badly decomposed, was found almost a month later, on June 9, by two forest rangers in a National Forest 65 miles north of Los Angeles. Investigators said there were signs of a fierce struggle, and that Mr. Radin was killed with a single shot behind the right ear.

Elaine Jacobs turned up several days after Mr. Radin had been reported missing. First, she told police that they had quarreled in the car and that he threw her out and drove off. Later, she changed that story and said that he had ordered the driver to let him out and to take her home.

Among those questioned in the case was Demond Wilson, one of the stars of the television series "Sanford & Son" and the "New Odd Couple," and a friend of Mr. Radin, having worked in his vaudeville shows. Mr. Radin was also Mr. Wilson's agent.

May Have Sensed Trouble

Apparently sensing trouble, Mr. Radin asked Mr. Wilson to follow him when he drove off with Miss Jacobs. When the limousine carrying the two sped away from the hotel and ran a red light, Mr. Wilson lost the trail.

The police think Miss Jacobs may be in Bogotá, Colombia. With her, they also believe, is Milane Bellechese, a reputed drug overlord who has his headquarters in Miami Beach. Miss Jacobs and Mr. Bellechese are said to have had a child together.

Elaine Jacobs first appeared in Los Angeles last year, according to Mr. Radin's associates. She bought a house in Sherman Oaks, in the San Fernando Valley, and rented an apartment in Beverly Hills. She gave lavish parties for Hollywood people, and at one of them, she met Roy Radin.

Mr. Radin was known as a cocaine user but not as a dealer. Associates said, however, that he often boasted

that he "made money" when he acquired drugs for his own use.

Investigators also are pursuing the possibility that Los Angeles drug dealers accused him of stealing 11 kilograms of cocaine and \$250,000 in cash from them. According to one police theory, drug dealers stole the money and the cocaine and blamed Mr. Radin to cover themselves.

Shortly after Mr. Radin disappeared, Miss Jacobs also dropped from sight, but not before she put the Sherman Oaks house up for sale. Later, it was discovered that the safe in the house had been broken into and that a collection of porcelain dolls had been vandalized. Each one had had its head severed.

Reason for Trip Unknown

No one seems certain just why Mr. Radin was in Los Angeles that weekend. Some associates say he flew out to try to revive a deal with the producer Robert Evans involving the construction of a major film studio in Puerto Rico. Mr. Radin was to raise most of the estimated \$35 million needed for the project and was said to have interested potential investors in Florida.

According to one associate, Mr. Radin had decided that he wanted to get out of the deal because he had discovered that much of the money he could raise would have come from the South Florida drug traffic.

Mr. Evans's aides said, however, that it was the producer who broke off the deal, and that Mr. Evans was not in Los Angeles the weekend that he was supposed to have met Mr. Radin.

Lending credibility to the theory that he was killed because of his involvement with drugs is the fact that Mr. Radin's fortunes had dwindled in recent years. "Had he lived," one former associate said, "there was a good chance that he would have been broke by the end of this year. He hadn't had anything going for him for a long time. A lot of ideas, a lot of plans, but nothing bringing in any money. And he wouldn't alter his style of life."

Mr. Radin's lawyer, Lawrence Hirsch, said, "It's true he didn't have what he did in the mid-1970's, but he was certainly solvent."

Mr. Gersh said, "Mr. Radin wanted to become a show-business legend, like his father, and, for a time, he almost succeeded."

Father a Broadway Promoter

Roy Radin was the son of Broadway Al Radin, a colorful speakeasy owner and Broadway promoter of the 1920's and 30's. His mother, Renee Radin, was an ex-showgirl who recalls proudly that Mike Todd once considered her as a replacement for Gypsy Rose Lee in "Star & Garter."

When Roy was born in 1950, Mrs. Radin quit show business and moved to Long Beach, L.I. For a while, his father visited on weekends but eventually his parents divorced.

By the time he was 9 years old, Roy

was playing poker with retirees in the old Long Beach hotels. Each year, Roy led all his schoolmates in selling raffle chances. His customers were his elderly poker partners.

At 16, he dropped out of high school and went to Florida to live with his father. Soon he was singing folk songs in coffee houses and doing publicity for the Clyde Beatty Circus.

Refused a raise, Mr. Radin formed a small group of performers and took them on a circuit of Florida theaters. He even persuaded George Jessel, a friend of his father, to lead his bill.

"I had J. Fred Muggs, the chimpanzee from the 'Today' show, a midget saxophone player, a drag queen magician and Jessel," Mr. Radin said later. "It wasn't one of my most notable shows, but Jessel taught me a lot. He went on the tour as a gamble. He knew I was only 17 and didn't have any money."

14 Years of Vaudeville

The tour lasted one week, but it was a success. The next tour went out for 30 weeks. Mr. Radin came back to New York and set himself up in his mother's home in Hampton Bays. His vaudeville shows, featuring unknowns and faded stars, toured for 14 years and made him a millionaire before he was 20.

At his peak in the late 1970's, he was running two or three tours a year as well as road shows designed for theaters-in-the-round and dinner theaters. Typically, his 1979 vaudeville shows included The Ink Spots, Johnnie Ray, Milton Berle, Donald O'Connor, Godfrey Cambridge, Eddie Fisher and Red Buttons.

In 1975, Mr. Radin bought a 66-room Tudor mansion in Southampton, L.I., to house his family — he had married his secretary in 1968 and they adopted two children — and the staff of Roy Radin Enterprises, which numbered about 20 people in 1979.

According to associates, Mr. Radin's success in vaudeville revivals went to his head. He saw himself as a major figure in show business and began to act like a 1920's Hollywood mogul.

'Basically Schlock'

"What he really wanted was acceptance on Broadway and in Hollywood," said Mr. Gersh, his press agent. "He began to tell everyone he was going to bring his troupe into New York, to the Palace."

"These shows may have been great in western Pennsylvania," Mr. Gersh went on, "but basically they were schlock. In fact, some of the stuff was embarrassing, it was so bad. But you couldn't tell that to Roy. He had no idea of good or bad, no taste at all. So we told him it was impossible to crack the Broadway establishment. He bought that for a time."

Then, in April 1980, Melonie Haller, a 23-year-old television actress, claimed that she had been beaten and raped during a party at Mr. Radin's

Southampton estate, Ocean Castle. Later, Robert McKeage 4th, a New Jersey businessman who had been Miss Haller's date for that weekend, pleaded guilty to having beaten her and was sentenced to 30 days in jail.

Mr. Radin was charged with criminal possession of LSD and cocaine, with illegal possession of a handgun and with menacing Miss Haller. Toni Fillet, then Mr. Radin's fiancée and later his second wife, was charged with third-degree assault. All those charges were later dropped.

A Drug Overdose

Actually, the police first went to the Radin mansion that weekend after receiving a call that an employee of Mr. Radin, Michael DeVinko, had taken an overdose of drugs. After that incident, police obtained a warrant and searched the house. Mr. DeVinko was briefly married to Judy Garland under the name Mickey Deans.

Mr. Radin hired Stephen Siegfried, a lawyer in Hampton Bays, to defend him on the Southampton charges. "He had a whole harem there," Mr. Siegfried said of his first visit to Ocean Castle. "He had one girl on each knee and another standing behind him with her arms around his neck. He was eating sandwiches and drinking vodka stingers and kissing the girls and trying to tell me what happened. He was big, all fat. It was wild."

Not everyone saw Roy Radin in that light. "I don't care what anyone says, he was nice to me," said Herbert Kory, who is better known in show business as Tiny Tim.

"He came along when I was really washed up," the singer said. "It may sound crazy now, but a call from Mr. Radin to work was like manna from heaven. He had immense power in this business. The only thing he missed out on was producing a star. He tried with me. He put an act together for me and it bombed."

Mr. Radin's mother, whom he supported along with his three half-sisters, recalled that every Christmas he sent \$10 to each child, by name, at a Suffolk County orphanage.

Many of Roy Radin's friends and former associates date his decline from the time of the Melonie Haller episode. "Secretaries, domestic help, they wouldn't work for him any more," Mr. Gersh said. "The people who hung around him got seedier and seedier — it was an entourage of losers, all feeding off him. The house became a curiosity for tourists and gawkers. The parties got wilder and more ominous."

Mr. Hirsch, his lawyer through most of the 1970's, said his dealings with the promoter had dwindled in that period and he cited Mr. Radin's "new friends and life style."

It was during his last two or three years that Mr. Radin became obsessed with the idea of breaking into films or the Broadway stage. "It was pathetic," said a former business associate. "He paid \$2,500 for a table at the Friars' dinner for Elizabeth Taylor and he'd never even met her."

"The only thing he had going for him was the vaudeville shows," the former associate said, "and he was

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Roy Radin

Associated Press

neglecting them to make TV and movie deals — deals that were not coming off."

"He talked of deals with all kinds of people," Mr. Gersh said. "There were films with Bob Evans, a couple of Broadway musicals with Harry Rigby, TV deals with Jim Aubrey, all kinds of things. But none of it had any substance. It was all press-agent stuff — stuff I made up."

Early this year, Mr. Radin divorced Toni Fillet, his second wife. "He still loved her," his mother said, "but he couldn't sustain a relationship with her or any other woman."

He sold the Southampton estate because, he said, he wanted to be closer to the show-business world in New York, but some associates said that he needed the money. "There was nothing coming in but he refused to give up the hangers-on and the limos," Mr. Gersh said.

He was operating out of a suite at the Mayflower Hotel on Central Park West at the time of his death. Last month, his mother, who had been working for him recently, and his small remaining office staff were forced out of the Mayflower.

A brief eight-day version of his vaudeville show scheduled to go on tour this month was postponed. A deal in which a group of Canadians were going to invest \$500,000 in a Radin-produced Broadway show is off — if it was ever on.

As the investigation continues into Mr. Radin's death, his mother is devoting herself to preserving the image of the generous, hard-working son she knew and loved. "He said to me just a couple of months ago, 'Mama, the one thing I want now is an Academy Award, and in two years I'm going to get one.'"

"He would have, too," Mrs. Dorr said, her eyes brimming with tears. "Now he will have to get it from God."