

L.A. Noir

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AROUND DIVISION 47, Los Angeles Municipal Court, the downtown courtroom where, for eleven weeks during the spring and summer of 1989, a preliminary hearing was held to determine if the charges brought in the 1983 murder of a thirty-three-year-old road-show promoter named Roy Alexander Radin should be dismissed or if the defendants should be bound over to superior court for arraignment and trial, it was said that there were, “in the works,” five movies, four books, and “countless” pieces about the case. Sometimes it was said that there were four movies and five books “in the works,” or one movie and two books, or two movies and six books. There were, in any event, “big balls” in the air. “Everybody’s working this one,” a reporter covering the trial said one morning as we waited to get patted down at the entrance to the courtroom, a security measure prompted by a telephoned bomb threat and encouraged by the general wish of everyone involved to make this a noticeable case. “Major money.”

This was curious. Murder cases are generally of interest to the extent that they suggest some anomaly or lesson in the world revealed, but there seemed neither anomalies nor lessons in the murder of Roy Radin, who was last seen alive getting into a limousine to go to dinner at a Beverly Hills restaurant, La Scala, and was next seen decomposed, in a canyon off Interstate 5. Among the defendants actually present for the preliminary hearing was Karen Delayne (“Lanie”) Jacobs Greenberger, a fairly attractive hard case late of South Florida, where her husband was said to have been the number-two man in the cocaine operation run by Carlos Lehder, the only major Colombian drug figure to have been tried and convicted in the United States. (Lanie Greenberger herself was said to have done considerable business in this line, and to have had nearly a million dollars in cocaine and cash stolen from her Sherman Oaks house not long before Roy Radin disappeared.) The other defendants present were William Mentzer and Alex Marti, somewhat less attractive hard cases, late of Larry Flynt’s security staff. (Larry Flynt is the publisher of *Hustler*, and one

of the collateral artifacts that turned up in the Radin case was a million-dollar check Flynt had written in 1983 to the late Mitchell Livingston WerBell III, a former arms dealer who operated a counterterrorism school outside Atlanta and described himself as a retired lieutenant general in the Royal Free Afghan Army. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department said that Flynt had written the check to WerBell as payment on a contract to kill Frank Sinatra, Hugh Hefner, Bob Guccione, and Walter Annenberg. Larry Flynt's lawyer said that there had been no contract, and described the check, on which payment was stopped, as a dinner-party joke.) There was also an absent defendant, a third Flynt security man, fighting extradition from Maryland.

In other words this was a genre case, and the genre, L.A. *noir*, was familiar. There is a *noir* case every year or two in Los Angeles. There was for example the Wonderland case, which involved the 1981 bludgeoning to death of four people. The Wonderland case, so called because the bludgeoning took place in a house on Wonderland Avenue in Laurel Canyon, turned, like the Radin case, on a million-dollar cocaine theft, but featured even more deeply *noir* players, including a nightclub entrepreneur and convicted cocaine dealer named Adel Nasrallah, aka "Eddie Nash"; a pornographic-movie star, now dead of AIDS, named John C. Holmes, aka "Johnny Wadd"; and a young man named Scott Thorson, who was, at the time he first testified in the case, an inmate in the Los Angeles County Jail (Scott Thorson was, in the natural ecology of the criminal justice system, the star witness for the state in the Wonderland case), and who in 1982 sued Liberace on the grounds that he had been promised \$100,000 a year for life in return for his services as Liberace's lover, driver, travel secretary, and animal trainer.

In this context there would have seemed nothing particularly novel about the Radin case. It was true that there were, floating around the edges of the story, several other unnatural deaths, for example that of Lanie Greenberger's husband, Larry Greenberger, aka "Vinnie De Angelo," who either shot himself or was shot in the head in September of 1988 on the front porch of his house in Okeechobee, Florida, but these deaths were essentially unsurprising. It was also true that the

Radin case offered not bad sidebar details. I was interested for example in how much security Larry Flynt apparently had patrolling Doheny Estates, where his house was, and Century City, where the *Hustler* offices were. I was interested in Dean Kahn, who ran the limousine service that provided the stretch Cadillac with smoked windows in which Roy Radin took, in the language of this particular revealed world, his last ride. I was interested in how Roy Radin, before he came to Los Angeles and decided to go to dinner at La Scala, had endeavored to make his way in the world by touring high school auditoriums with Tiny Tim, Frank Fontaine, and a corps of tap-dancing dwarfs.

Still, promoters of tap-dancing dwarfs who get done in by hard cases have not been, historically, the stuff of which five movies, four books, and countless pieces are made. The almost febrile interest in this case derived not from the principals but from what was essentially a cameo role, played by Robert Evans. Robert Evans had been head of production at Paramount during the golden period of *The Godfather* and *Love Story* and *Rosemary's Baby*, had moved on to produce independently such successful motion pictures as *Chinatown* and *Marathon Man*, and was, during what was generally agreed to be a dry spell in his career (he had recently made a forty-five-minute videotape on the life of John Paul II, and had announced that he was writing an autobiography, to be called *The Kid Stays in the Picture*), a district attorney's dream: a quite possibly desperate, quite famously risk-oriented, high-visibility figure with low-life connections.

It was the contention of the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office that Lanie Greenberger had hired her co-defendants to kill Roy Radin after he refused to cut her in on his share of the profits from Robert Evans's 1984 picture *The Cotton Club*. It was claimed that Lanie Greenberger had introduced Roy Radin, who wanted to get into the movie business, to Robert Evans. It was claimed that Roy Radin had offered to find, in return for 45 percent of the profits from either one Evans picture (*The Cotton Club*) or three Evans pictures (*The Cotton Club*, *The Sicilian*, and *The Two Jakes*), "Puerto Rican investors" willing to put up either thirty-five or fifty million dollars.

Certain objections leap to the nonprosecutorial mind here (the “Puerto Rican investors” turned out to be one Puerto Rican banker with “connections,” the money never actually materialized, Roy Radin therefore had no share of the profits, there were no profits in any case), but seem not to have figured in the state’s case. The District Attorney’s office was also hinting, if not quite contending, that Robert Evans himself had been in on the payoff of Radin’s killers, and the DA’s office had a protected witness (still another Flynt security man, this one receiving \$3,000 a month from the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department) who had agreed to say in court that one of the defendants, William Mentzer, told him that Lanie Greenberger and Robert Evans had, in the witness’s words, “paid for the contract.” Given the state’s own logic, it was hard to know what Robert Evans might have thought to gain by putting out a contract on the goose with the \$50 million egg, but the deputy district attorney on the case seemed unwilling to let go of this possibility, and had in fact told reporters that Robert Evans was “one of the people who we have not eliminated as a suspect.”

Neither, on the other hand, was Robert Evans one of the people they had arrested, a circumstance suggesting certain lacunae in the case from the major-money point of view, and also from the district attorney’s. Among people outside the criminal justice system, it was widely if vaguely assumed that Robert Evans was somehow “on trial” during the summer of 1989. “Evans Linked for First Time in Court to Radin’s Murder,” the headlines were telling them, and, in the past-tense obituary mode, “Evans’ Success Came Early: Career Epitomized Hollywood Dream.”

“Bob always had a premonition that his career would peak before he was fifty and fade downhill,” Peter Bart, who had worked under Evans at Paramount, told the *Los Angeles Times*, again in the obituary mode. “He lived by it. He was haunted by it. . . . To those of us who knew him and knew what a good-spirited person he was, it’s a terrible sadness.” Here was a case described by the *Times* as “focused on the dark side of Hollywood deal making,” a case offering “an unsparing look at the film capital’s unsavory side,” a case everyone was calling just Cotton Club, or even just Cotton, as in “‘Cotton’: Big Movie Deal’s Sequel Is Murder.”

Inside the system, the fact that no charge had been brought against the single person on the horizon who had a demonstrable connection with *The Cotton Club* was rendering Cotton Club, *qua* Cotton Club, increasingly problematic. Not only was Robert Evans not “on trial” in Division 47, but what was going on there was not even a “trial,” only a preliminary hearing, intended to determine whether the state had sufficient evidence and cause to prosecute those charged, none of whom was Evans. Since 1978, when a California Supreme Court ruling provided criminal defendants the right to a preliminary hearing even after indictment by a grand jury, preliminary hearings have virtually replaced grand juries as a way of indicting felony suspects in California, and are one of the reasons that criminal cases in Los Angeles now tend to go on for years. The preliminary hearing alone in the McMartin child-abuse case lasted eighteen months.

On the days I dropped by Division 47, the judge, a young black woman with a shock of gray in her hair, seemed fretful, inattentive. The lawyers seemed weary. The bailiffs discussed their domestic arrangements on the telephone. When Lanie Greenberger entered the courtroom, not exactly walking but undulating forward on the balls of her feet, in a little half-time prance, no one bothered to look up. The courtroom had been full on the day Robert Evans appeared as the first witness for the prosecution and took the Fifth, but in the absence of Evans there were only a few reporters and the usual two or three retirees in the courtroom, perhaps a dozen people in all, reduced to interviewing each other and discussing alternative names for the Night Stalker case, which involved a man named Richard Ramirez who had been accused of thirteen murders and thirty other felonies committed in Los Angeles County during 1984 and 1985. One reporter was calling the Ramirez case, which was then in its sixth month of trial after nine weeks of preliminary hearings and six months of jury selection, Valley Intruder. Another had settled on Serial Killer. “I still slug it Night Stalker,” a third said, and she turned to me. “Let me ask you,” she said. “This is how hard up I am. Is there a story in your being here?”

The preliminary hearing in the Radin case had originally been scheduled for three weeks, and lasted eleven. On July 12, 1989, in Division 47, Judge Patti Jo McKay ruled not only that

there was sufficient evidence to bind over Lanie Greenberger, Alex Marti, and William Mentzer for trial but also that the Radin murder may have been committed for financial gain, which meant that the defendants could receive, if convicted, penalties of death. "Mr. Radin was an obstacle to further negotiation involving *The Cotton Club*," the prosecuting attorney had argued in closing. "The deal could not go through until specific issues such as percentages were worked out. It was at that time that Mrs. Greenberger had the motive to murder Mr. Radin."

I was struck by this as a final argument, because it seemed to suggest an entire case based on the notion that an interest in an entirely hypothetical share of the entirely hypothetical profits from an entirely hypothetical motion picture (at the time Roy Radin was killed, *The Cotton Club* had an advertising poster but no shooting script and no money and no cast and no start date) was money in the bank. All that had stood between Lanie Greenberger and Fat City, as the prosecutor saw it, was boilerplate, a matter of seeing that "percentages were worked out."

The prosecution's certainty on this point puzzled me, and I asked an acquaintance in the picture business if he thought there had ever been money to be made from *The Cotton Club*. He seemed not to believe what I was asking. There had been "gross positions," he reminded me, participants with a piece of the gross rather than the net. There had been previous investors. There had been commitments already made on *The Cotton Club*, paper out all over town. There had been, above all, a \$26 million budget going in (it eventually cost \$47 million), and a production team not noted for thrift. "It had to make a hundred to a hundred forty million, depending on how much got stolen, before anybody saw gross," he said. "Net on this baby was dreamland. Which could have been figured out, with no loss of life, by a junior agent just out of the William Morris mailroom."

There was always in the Cotton Club case a certain dreamland aspect, a looniness that derived in part from the ardent if misplaced faith of everyone involved, from the belief in windfalls, in sudden changes of fortune (five movies and four books would change someone's fortune, a piece of *The Cotton Club* someone else's, a high-visibility case the district attorney's); in killings, both literal and figurative. In fact this kind of faith is

not unusual in Los Angeles. In a city not only largely conceived as a series of real estate promotions but largely supported by a series of confidence games, a city even then afloat on motion pictures and junk bonds and the B-2 Stealth bomber, the conviction that something can be made of nothing may be one of the few narratives in which everyone participates. A belief in extreme possibilities colors daily life. Anyone might have woken up one morning and been discovered at Schwab's, or killed at Bob's Big Boy. "Luck is all around you," a silky voice says on the California State Lottery's Lotto commercials, against a background track of "Dream a Little Dream of Me." "Imagine winning millions . . . what would you do?"

During the summer of 1989 this shimmer of the possible still lay on Cotton Club, although there seemed, among those dreamers to whom I spoke in both the picture business and the criminal justice business, a certain impatience with the way the case was actually playing out. There was nobody in either business, including the detectives on the case, who could hear the words "Cotton Club" and not see a possible score, but the material was resistant. It still lacked a bankable element. There was a definite wish to move on, as they say in the picture business, to screenplay. The detectives were keeping in touch with motion picture producers, car phone to car phone, sketching in connecting lines not apparent in the courtroom. "This friend of mine in the sheriff's office laid it out for me three years ago," one producer told me. "The deal was, 'This is all about drugs, Bob Evans is involved, we're going to get him.' And so forth. He wanted me to have the story when and if the movie was done. He called me a week ago, from his car, wanted to know if I was going to move on it."

I heard a number of alternative scenarios. "The story is in this one cop who wouldn't let it go," I was told by a producer. "The story is in the peripheral characters," I was told by a detective I had reached by dialing his car phone. Another producer reported having run into Robert Evans's lawyer, Robert Shapiro, the evening before at Hillcrest Country Club, where the Thomas Hearns-Sugar Ray Leonard fight was being shown closed circuit from Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. "I asked how

our boy was doing,” he said, meaning Evans. “Shapiro says he’s doing fine. Scotfree, he says. Here’s the story. A soft guy from our world, just sitting up there in his sixteen-room house, keeps getting visits from these detectives. Big guys. Real hard guys. Apes. Waiting for him to crack.”

Here we had the rough line for several quite different stories, but it would have been hard not to notice that each of them depended for its dramatic thrust on the presence of Robert Evans. I mentioned this one day to Marcia Morrissey, who—as co-counsel with the Miami trial lawyer Edward Shohat, who had defended Carlos Lehder—was representing Lanie Greenberger. “Naturally they all *want* him in,” Marcia Morrissey said.

I asked if she thought the District Attorney’s Office would manage to get him in.

Marcia Morrissey rolled her eyes. “That’s what it’s called, isn’t it? I mean face it. It’s called Cotton Club.”

—1989