

Copyright 1993 The Chronicle Publishing Co.
The San Francisco Chronicle
View Related Topics
MARCH 7, 1993, SUNDAY, SUNDAY EDITION
SECTION: ;Pg. 3; TV COMMENTARY

LENGTH: 799 words

HEADLINE: Ex-Mobsters Open Up

BYLINE: JOHN STANLEY

BODY:

Once upon a time, within the ranks of the American Mafia, stool pigeons or "squealers" were rare. The unwritten code of silence -- "omerta" -- was an honored Sicilian tradition, and any "rat" who defied that tradition defied death.

"But that's all changing now," said documentary film maker Marc **Levin**, who with his father Alan M. **Levin** has produced "**Mob Stories**," a one-hour special debuting Tuesday at 10 p.m. on the **HBO** cable channel. "Second and third generation Italian-Americans no longer have that tradition of loyalty from growing up in immigrant neighborhoods," added **Levin**, an award-winning writer-director of numerous TV documentaries.

"Today's mobsters grew up Americans, and they want it all now, not 25 years from now." As a result, "the fiber of the underworld has eroded away from within -- mobsters have turned against each other for revenge or to save their own necks. They're talking. They're spilling everything they know."

Astonishingly, proving that truth is stranger than fiction, "**Mob Stories**" chronicles the stories of five members of the underworld, all of whom were tracked down discreetly by the **Levin** team. After gaining trust, the **Levins** convinced the gangsters to open up. These narratives are chilling in their candidness and sound like vignettes out of "The Godfather" and "Goodfellas":

* Dominick "Big Dom" Lofaro: A member of the New York Gambino family, this one-time hit man turned into an FBI informant for a reduced sentence after being charged with selling heroin.

* Joseph "Joe Dogs" Iannuzzi: A Gambino loan shark and bookmaker,

he fell behind in paying off his debts to a family "capo" and was savagely beaten by members of his own gang. For revenge, Iannuzzi called the FBI and cooperated in getting the goods on his boss, even daring to walk into a life-threatening situation while wired with a microphone.

* Giacomo "Fat Jackie" Dinorscio: Currently serving 30 years for drug dealing, this lifelong mobster has refused to talk, even though it would have meant a reduced sentence. He is the show's one example of the old Mafia school -- loyal to the end to the code.

* Thomas "Tommy Del" DelGiorno: A former capo in the turbulent Philadelphia crime family led by Nicodemo "Little Nick" Scarfo, DelGiorno refused to carry out a hit and defected to the government before the mob could retaliate. His testimony helped to bring Scarfo, considered a "loose cannon" sociopath, to justice.

* "Brother Frank" Minucci: A one-time Gambino enforcer, who once tied "deadbeats" to the bumper of his car and dragged them through the streets, he discovered a woman he loved, refused to fulfill a hit contract, and bought his way out of the mob for \$ 250,000. Married and "settled down," he became a religious fanatic who now preaches the gospel and reads avidly from the Bible.

"What we're seeing," said **Levin**, "is the darkest side of the human spirit: greed, violence, fear. These are amoral men, yet as Minucci proves, as they all prove in their own odd ways, there's a human side to their stories. All of these men had romanticized rationalizations for what they'd done. A set of values even within their own corrupt lives."

Levin also observed that "they were desperate to let it come pouring out, because these are men isolated in worlds where they can't tell anyone who they really are. The exception was Fat Jackie, who is in prison and loyal to the mob. This guy is proud of the fact he hasn't talked. And Brother Frank, he's gone straight. But the others are frightened men in hiding."

Originally the documentary was going to be an overview of the Mafia's downfall, "Twilight of the Dons," based on contacts the **Levins** had made when producing the Emmy-winning Bill Moyers special, "The Secret Government -- The Constitution in Crisis." But when the **Levins** and executive producer Nicholas Gage started their investigations, they realized that a far more effective glimpse into organized crime could be told through personally spoken, uncensored stories.

"Even though we were dealing with shady characters, I never felt personally in danger," said **Levin**. "The most apprehensive moment came when we met Joe Dogs in an airport. We drove around in circles with his personal bodyguard. He wanted to make sure he wasn't being followed. Paranoia is everywhere with these men."

Everything the **Levins** did was subject to scrutiny by the gangsters. "These men could get uptight about the slightest thing. And you had to be able to put aside your personal feelings about some of the things they'd done and try to show some sympathy, to let them know you understood their dilemmas. It was a strange ambivalent feeling that came out of making '**Mob Stories**.' I'll never forget it."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO, Joseph 'Joe Dogs' Iannuzzi