



This is the latest story in our new series that revisits some of the most infamous and curious crimes in Hollywood history

To CATCH the

ZODIAC Killer

AFTER THE COUNTRY WAS TERRORIZED BY A STRING OF GRUESOME
HOMICIDES, A FIRST-TIME FILM DIRECTOR CAME UP WITH AN AUDACIOUS PLAN
TO BRING THE FAME-HUNGRY MURDERER OUT OF HIDING

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The infamous

Bay Area murderer known as the Zodiac Killer has inspired around half a dozen feature films, from 1971's highly fictionalized *Dirty Harry* to director David Fincher's assiduously researched 2007 movie, *Zodiac*. But the movie that opened at San Francisco's RKO Golden Gate theater in April 1971 is something else entirely. Initially called *Zodiac*, and later retitled *The Zodiac Killer*, the picture wasn't just made to detail the crimes of the man who, at the time of the film's release, was believed to have murdered at least five people over the previous two and a half years and threatened to kill many more. It was made to *catch* him. "We knew he was up in Northern California," says the film's director, a former fast-food restaurateur named Tom Hanson. "And if I showed [the] film up there, I thought he'd have to go see it. If he went to see it—we could get lucky."

Hanson did *not* get lucky, and almost 50 years on from *Zodiac*'s reign of terror, the killer's identity remains a mystery. However, the director believes he did succeed in luring the unknown assailant to the movie—which he claims resulted in a face-to-face encounter. While Hanson never proved his suspect was the Zodiac, he did create a pop culture artifact whose close-to-contemporaneous depiction of real-life crimes and extraordinary backstory sets it apart from every other film on the subject—and, indeed, every other film, period. "It's amazing," says Joe Ziemba, director of the American Genre Film Archive (AGFA), which is releasing *The Zodiac Killer* on Blu-ray July 25. "The idea of 'There is someone out there killing my fellow humans, what can I do as a person to help catch them? Well, I can make a movie and maybe he'll come!' There's nothing else like that."

"This is the Zodiac speaking..."

It was just after 11 p.m. on the night of Dec. 20, 1968, when the headlights of a car driven by Mrs. Stella Borges illuminated two bodies in a lovers' lane close to her house in Solano County, around 30 miles north of San Francisco. As the police would soon discover, the deceased victims were high schoolers David Faraday and Betty Lou Jensen. The pair were on a date—their first—when someone shot Far-

aday in the head while he was still sitting in the car he had borrowed from his mother, and then shot Jensen five times as she tried to flee. The victims were neither robbed nor sexually molested, and there was no obvious motive for the crime.

Seven months later, on the night of July 4, 1969, there was another shooting, just a few miles away. This time the victims were Darlene Ferrin, 22, and Michael Mageau, 19, who were shot while parked in Blue Rock Springs Park. Ferrin died from her wounds, but Mageau survived, and described the shooter as a heavyset man in his late 20s with a military-style haircut. After the shooting, a man called the Vallejo PD switchboard claiming responsibility. He also said he had "killed those kids last year." Assuming the caller was telling the truth, it was an indication that he enjoyed flaunting his ability to murder without repercussions. There would be many more.

On Aug. 1, 1969, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *San Francisco Examiner*, and the *Vallejo Times-Herald* received near-identical handwritten letters from someone claiming responsibility for the three murders and the shooting of Mageau. The letters contained information about the crimes that had not



(From far left) A fictional scene from Tom Hanson's film; the movie poster; actors depicting real victims; Hal Reed as the Zodiac



Though neither a cop

nor a professional lawbreaker, Tom Hanson has seen more than his fair share of crime. The director of *The Zodiac Killer* was born in Minneapolis, but by the late '60s was living in Los Angeles, where he had become a fast-food-franchise entrepreneur, owning a number of Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets and ultimately becoming president of the Pizza Man chain of restaurants. As a result, he found himself dealing with robbers on a semi-regular basis. "I've been held up because of all the fast-food places I've had," says Hanson, now 80. "They'd never gotten the money. I was always packing."

In between scaring off criminals, Hanson began to edge his way into the movie business, securing roles in low-budget exploitation films like 1966's thriller *Red Zone Cuba* and 1968's female-biker-gang movie *The Hellcats*, both of which would later be lampooned in episodes of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Bitten by the movie bug, and with his business starting to fail, Hanson decided to direct his own film.

That film was *The Zodiac Killer*, the movie with which Hanson hoped to capture the real-life murderer, something that would benefit both society and Hanson himself—when the inevitable attendant publicity turned the project into a hit. Not

been released to the public. Each missive also came with one-third of an encoded message. The writer threatened to go on a "kill rampage" unless the newspapers printed the encrypted note, which they all subsequently did. The code was swiftly broken by a high school teacher and his wife. "I like killing people because it is so much fun," the deciphered message began. "It is more fun than killing wild game in the forest because man is the most dangerous animal of all." On Aug. 7, the *San Francisco Examiner* received another letter with more information about the murders. This time the writer also gave himself a name. "Dear Editor," began the letter. "This is the Zodiac speaking."

Two more murders would be credited to the Zodiac during the fall of 1969, followed by a letter to the *San Francisco Chronicle* along with a bloody portion of the shirt worn by the latest victim, cabdriver Paul Lee Stine. The letter itself also contained an extremely sinister threat: "Schoolchildren make nice targets," wrote the Zodiac. "I think I shall wipe out a school bus some morning. Just shoot out the front tire + then pick off the kiddies as they come bouncing out." The *Chronicle* made the threat public, prompting panic among locals. Journalist Duffy Jennings, who started working at the *Chronicle* as a copyboy in 1967 and eventually became the newspaper's chief Zodiac reporter in the mid-'70s, recalls that San Francisco felt like a city under siege. "Zodiac's victims all appeared to be random, so you never knew where he was going to go next and who his next victims would be," says Jennings. "There was a complete and total atmosphere of fear around the Bay Area of this guy and who he was going to kill next."

Following Stine's murder, 50 officers and 10 inspectors were assigned to the case. There was no shortage of tips or suspects, with around 2,500 people reportedly being investigated. But the Zodiac continued to evade law enforcement's grasp. What could be done to catch the killer? Tom Hanson had an idea.



(From left)
Hanson today;
Hanson
(right) with
Chicken
Delight founder
Al Tunick,
circa 1965



that the Los Angeles-shot production would need to gross too much to turn a profit. “It was low-budget,” says Hanson, who financed the project himself. “Nobody got paid. It was day to day. Get it shot, get it done, get it put together.” With no money for stars, Hanson cast an acquaintance named Hal Reed to play the Zodiac Killer, who in the film is depicted as a young mailman. “I knew Hal and I thought, ‘Well, hell, he could play the Zo, you know?’” says the director of the less-than-exhaustive casting process.

This laissez-faire attitude toward the project would be evident in the finished film, which veers wildly between fact, fantasy, and near-farce. While the fatal stabbing of victim No. 4, Cecelia Shepard, is depicted with chilling accuracy, another entirely fictitious sequence finds Reed’s Zodiac killing an older woman by persuading her to inspect the engine of her car and then crushing her head by jumping up and down on the hood. Of course, the main purpose of the film was not to win Oscars, but to snag the Zodiac. “The whole thing was to get it done and get it up there while he was still there,” says Hanson.

“Up there” was San Francisco, where Hanson planned to capture the Zodiac with the help of a half dozen or so friends, including *The Zodiac Killer* coscreenwriter Ray Cantrell, with whom Hanson had appeared in *Hellcats*. The specifics of the plan involved a raffle, with a Kawasaki 350cc motorcycle serving as the bait. People who came to see the film at the RKO Golden Gate theater, which Hanson had rented for the week, were given a card and invited to complete the sentence “The Zodiac kills because...” Cinemagoers then dropped the card into a large, specially built box. What attendees didn’t know was that one of Hanson’s associates was inside the box comparing the writing on the cards with that of the Zodiac. If a match was made, the person in the box would flick an electrical switch to alert another accomplice, who was hidden in a nearby freezer and could ID the suspect through a vent. That person would, in turn, inform the rest of the crew, who were stationed around the cinema on the lookout for anything suspicious. Finally, they would all approach together and apprehend the notorious Zodiac Killer! At least that was the plan, one that Hanson admits he did not tell the police. Why? “Well, because I know what they’ll do—what they always do,” he says. “‘Hands off!’ ‘Don’t do that!’ ‘Stay away from it!’ You know...”

The idea that the Zodiac might attend a film about his crimes is not as crazy as it might sound. The killer clearly enjoyed his notoriety and was thought to be something of a film buff. In the Zodiac’s first letter, he had written about man being “the most dangerous animal of all to kill,” which seemed to reference the 1932 film *The Most Dangerous Game*, in which a character called Count Zaroff hunts people for sport on a remote island. *Chronicle* cartoonist-turned-Zodiac expert Robert Graysmith even suggested in his authoritative 1986 best-seller, *Zodiac*, that

the knife the killer had used to murder Cecelia Shepard bore a notable resemblance to the one used by Zaroff in the film.

Graysmith, who would be played by Jake Gyllenhaal in Fincher’s 2007 film, actually attended one of the screenings of *The Zodiac Killer* in San Francisco, and later recalled the occasion in his book. “I went to see a low budget film about Zodiac at the Golden Gate Theater,” he wrote. “The film ends by hinting that Zodiac may be the man behind you in the theater. Since Zodiac was a movie fan and an egotist and since the movie played only to a limited audience in San Francisco, the chances he was in the seat behind you *were* pretty good.”

But, as the weeklong engagement of *The Zodiac Killer* neared its end, the chances of Hanson succeeding in his mission began to look pretty slim. The only remotely dramatic thing to have occurred was the near suffocation of Cantrell while he was taking a turn hiding in the freezer. (“I thought he was going to kill me,” says Hanson of the screenwriter. “There was a vent there, which is where you were supposed to have your head. I don’t know what he did.”) However, that all changed on closing night when Hanson visited the restroom during the last moments of the final screening.

“I’m standing there, I heard the door open, and a guy walked over to the urinal,” says Hanson. “I’m finishing, and all of a sudden he says, ‘You know, real blood doesn’t come out like that.’” According to Hanson, the man then turned to look at him, at which point the director found himself staring at the face depicted in the composite image released after the murder of Paul Stine. “The lips, the face, the hair, the whole look, to me, was him,” says Hanson. “I said something like ‘Oh, yeah, you’re probably right.’ I went back [to my guys]



and said, 'I think he's here. Grab him and throw his ass into the office.' Which they did."

When Hanson himself appeared in the office, he was horrified to discover that his team had actually made friends with the man he believed to be the country's most notorious murderer. "They're having a hell of a good time," he recalls. "My guys were totally convinced this can't be a serial killer." So Hanson decided to play a trick on his suspect to see how he would react. "I'm about a foot away from his face," he explains. "I told him, 'The reason you're here is my brother, Paul Stine, the cabdriver, was killed by the Zodiac.' He was not flustered; he was not like, 'Who the hell are you guys?' Nothing, zero, zip. I thought, 'This is going nowhere.' So we sent him on his way."

Hanson still believed the man—whom he declines to name for legal reasons—was the Zodiac, so he teamed with a pair of private investigators to follow the suspect. "They had a spy van, which we pulled up to where his house was," he says. "He comes out and I almost fell on the floor. He comes out as a mailman, which is how I showed him in the movie. It was just one thing like that after another."

Eventually, Hanson gave up the chase. He returned to the food industry, selling ovens and then later a heat lamp of his own design, and is now "reluctantly retired," according to his grandson Scott Hanson, who is making a documentary about his life called *Zodiac Man*. As for Hanson's wild cinematic experiment, it essentially became a forgotten movie until AGFA, an offshoot of the Alamo Draft-house cinema chain dedicated to preserving and distributing genre films, screened a 4K restoration at last September's Fantastic Fest film festival in Austin. "We did two sold-out shows," says Ziemba. "The great thing was the fascination you could feel from people. Whether they hated it or loved it, everyone was talking about it."

But what of the Zodiac? He would send just one more letter that is definitively regarded as coming from his pen, a note in 1974 that praised *The Exorcist* as "the best satirical comedy that I have ever seen." Of course, the Zodiac could have carried on committing crimes without publicly admitting to them. In November 1969, he had written to the *Chronicle* claiming to have killed two more people for which he was not being held responsible, but also stating that he would be committing his horrendous acts in a more anonymous fashion. "I shall no longer announce to anyone," wrote the killer. "When I commit my murders, they shall look like routine robberies, killing of anger, & a few fake accidents, etc. The police shall never catch me because I have been too clever for them."

Almost a half century after Zodiac wrote those taunting words, the police still haven't completely given up on proving him wrong. "The case is still open," a spokesperson for the San Francisco Police Department says. "We do not discuss open cases, we can only tell you that it's open." They're certainly not short on leads. Ron Freeman was a Pittsburgh police officer for 37 years, nearly 20 of which

(Clockwise from top left) Victims Betty Lou Jensen, David Faraday, and Darlene Ferrin; Zodiac's coded messages; a police sketch



he spent working homicides. He now teaches crime-scene investigation at the University of Pittsburgh and is the sponsor of a student cold-case club that is examining the Zodiac case.

Freeman says that, even now, police in California are "swamped with calls—there are so many people that think they know who the Zodiac is." As it happens, the students were contacted by a woman who suspects her father is the mystery murderer. Freeman asked her to send some items her father had touched, hoping to match his DNA with that of the Zodiac, which the police have, thanks to the killer licking the envelopes he sent to newspapers back in the day. "Once the things get processed through the lab we'll share the information with the investigators," says Freeman.

Should this long shot lead nowhere, will we ever discover the identity of the Zodiac Killer? Duffy Jennings believes we still might. "The obvious guess is that he's dead or long been in prison for something else," he says. On the other hand... "Whoever it was [could] die and leave behind something that proves he was the guy," Jennings continues. "It's one of the great cold cases of all time. But we haven't had anything *yet*." When it came to one obsessed fast-food magnate-turned-filmmaker, it certainly was not for lack of trying. ♦