ZODIAC CODE CRACKED?
REAL CRIME
DETECTIVES SPEAK: NEW LEADS NARROWS IT TO TWO SUSPECTS

“MY DAD NABBED TEEN SICKOS”
SNATCHED FROM THE STATION

THE ‘RAILWAY KILLERS’ SET THEIR TRAPS
...THEN THEY BECAME THE HUNTED

TAKEN INTO THE WOODS
WHY DID SHE WALK AWAY WITH HER WOULD-BE MURDERER?

HIS TWISTED “TOY BOX”
THESE CRIMES WERE SO VILE THEY MADE A COP KILL HERSELF

SHE DEIFIED THE CARTELS
THEY TRIED TO KILL THE MAYOR, BUT SHE WOULDN’T BACK DOWN

MINUTES TO MURDER
By the time the next bus arrived young Daniel had disappeared

PLUS:
COCAINE COWBOYS – THEY CARED, HE KILLED
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HE MURDERED THE FAMILY HE NEVER HAD
WILLIE FALCON AND HIS PARTNER SAL MAGLUTA WERE THE BIGGEST COCAINE KINGPINS IN MIAMI AT A TIME WHEN COLOMBIAN CARTELS WERE MAKING IT SNOW IN THE SUNSHINE STATE

WORDS SETH FERRANTI

From a drug baron to a prisoner in the war on drugs, to a possible political refugee – Willie Falcon has lived a charmed and dangerous life. Existing and operating on the perimeters of the law while flaunting his ill-gotten gains, the Cuban-born Falcon made billions with his partner Sal Magluta. After dropping out of high school, Falcon shot straight to the top of the cocaine world from his base in Miami during the 1980s. At the peak of the Miami Vice era he became the go-to smuggler for the Colombian cartels. He was the cocaine kingpin and the biggest drug dealer in the biggest drug-dealing city in the world.

NOVICES IN THE TRADE

Back in 1979 Willie Falcon and Sal Magluta were nobodies – just two Cuban immigrants and high school dropouts in Miami. They were outsiders, but they were Americanised enough that they weren’t above pursuing the American Dream in Miami’s criminal underworld. They started their drug-dealing escapades as small-time dope slingers. From the beginning Falcon acted as the point man while Magluta was the negotiator and the brains behind the scenes. Falcon was a big hit, both in athletics – he was a high school track star – and with the ladies, who really couldn’t resist him. He was a cocaine playboy who raced boats.

Always the centre of the party, Falcon engaged the crowd while Magluta, who handled business, took stock of the players. Falcon, a Don Juan macho-man type, acted as the ambassador for the duo as they climbed up the hierarchy of Miami’s underworld. This was a vicious battleground that announced its presence to the world with 1979’s DadeLand Mall Massacre. Falcon and his partner were solid businessmen, not the type to steal or rip people off. But when it came to money they weren’t afraid to get their hands dirty.
FALCON AND MAGLUTA WERE THE KINGS HOLDING COURT AT THE HOTEL AS THEY REIGNED SUPREME AS OVERLORDS

“...We pretty much had a failed state on our hands in South Florida,” Roben Farzad, the author of Hotel Scarface: Where Cocaine Cowboys Partied and Plotted to Control Miami, told Real Crime. “If you look at the cover of Time magazine’s ‘Paradise Lost’ issue in November of 81, this place went from a sleepy terminus on the seaboard to the murder capital of America. From the outside, growing up and listening to Nancy Reagan; George Bush and the drug task force you’d think that all these cocaine dealers were monsters, but I found a lot of these guys were very eloquent.”

Falcon and Magluta benefited from being around the drug game’s central hub and ended up with an offer they couldn’t refuse. An old acquaintance got stuck with a lot of coke and asked the boys to help unload it on the black market. They were in the game at a high level as easily as that – a dream come true for the two wannabe Scarfaces. By the late 1970s more and more Cubans were partnering up with Colombians in the drug trade.

Falcon graduated to working directly with Colombian suppliers and his fortune was made. He had some contacts he knew at a local bank, and he was able to leverage those financial connections to grow his drug empire and move from the small time to the big time. Falcon was on his way to becoming a very rich and powerful man – one who dealt directly with infamous drug lords like Pablo Escobar and Griselda Blanco. Falcon was only 24 years old at the time.

“Falcon started dealing cocaine in the mid-1970s,” Scott Deitcher, the author of The Silent Don: The Criminal World of Santo Trafficante Jr., told Real Crime. “At that time a new wave of younger Cuban gangsters were moving in to replace the older generation ‘bolita’ bankers and drug kingspins, many of whom came over in 1959 after Castro took over Cuba. In Miami these early Cuban gangsters worked closely with Mafioso like Tampa boss Santo Trafficante Jr.” They also worked with the Colombians who were controlling the cocaine trade.

COCAINE CENTRAL

In the late 70s and early 80s Miami was the murder and drug capital of the world, and The Mutiny, an exclusive hotel and club at Sailboat Bay just south of downtown Miami in Coconut Grove, was where the cocaine cowboys partied and schemed. The floors were rammed full of drug traffickers, gangsters, informants and criminals of all types making deals, looking for business and trading information. Falcon and Magluta were the kings holding court at the hotel as they reigned supreme as overlords of both the bloody cocaine-charged underworld and the star-studded Mutiny environment that catered to celebrities and musicians.

“If you’re a kingpin at this club and you see Stevie Nicks walk in, you see Led Zeppelin walk in, some of the biggest personalities, you don’t want to go fawning like a little kid at a Beatles concert,” said Farzad. “You want to be like, ‘I’ll send a bottle to his table.’ It was very much... everybody understood why everybody else was there. For the most part they didn’t shoot each other there, or bust one another there.”

The drug lords were the main attraction despite the who’s who of athletes, celebrities and musicians that frequented the luxurious hotel. They conducted their illicit business in the open with shadowy figures and criminal types, making million-dollar drug deals and putting hits on rivals – using the Mutiny as a headquarters for Miami’s burgeoning cocaine trade. “Between the cops and the drug lords it was kind of treated as a free trade zone,” said Farzad. “Like, ‘We know why you’re here, you know why we’re here, let’s not create a scene.’ The criminals held nothing personal against those cops. The cops’ job was to chase them. The criminals’ job was to evade them and corrupt them. That lasted until Miami became this explosion of murder and bloodlust.”

The hotel was elegant and very popular among
TOP: The Mutiny was one of the best hotels in the world, a top-rated five-star hotel that catered for the rich and infamous.

MIDDLE: The women that hung out at the Mutiny Hotel loved to party. The Cuban and Colombian drug lords loved American women.

Just like regular people flock to celebrities, the celebrities flock to the drug dealers. The cocaine singers that held court at the Mutiny were in high demand.

COCOAINE COWBOY

WILLIE FALCON AND SAL MAGLUTA WERE IN THE MIDDLE OF A FIRESTORM BUT MANAGED TO AVOID THE BEES AND CONTINUE TO MAKE MONEY

When the Medellin cartel was flooding Miami with cocaine in the late 70s and early 80s, a lot of conflicts erupted between the Colombians and their associates. With all the money available, guys weren’t taking any ‘shorts’”. They wanted what they thought was theirs, and they would get it by any means necessary. Legend holds that Griselda Blanco – the Black Widow – invented motorcycle drive-bys, to surprise and dispatch her rivals. The vicious cocaine queen did whatever she wanted, killing randomly and wantonly. Luckily Falcon and Magluta never got in her way. As two of the cartel’s biggest smugglers, they were very valuable to the higher-ups like Pablo Escobar.

The violence that surrounded the cocaine cowboys was emphasised to the nation in the Dadeland Massacre. This vicious assault and shootout happened in the middle of the day at a trendy mall, proving that the Cocaine Cowboys only cared about money. If you messed with their money or their territory, then you were dealt with. Everything was life or death for them. They lived the life that Hollywood dramatised – a hail of bullets and a motorcycle speeding away announcing the presence of the Cocaine Cowboys and what they were trying to accomplish.
“The owner himself told me you could be in some place like Cartagena or Panama,” said Farzad, “and see people flash the licence plate on the front of their bulletproof Benz or Rolls Royces: the winking pirate logo, the gold licence plate – you started seeing that all across South America and Europe.”

By the mid-1980s the duo – dubbed ‘Los Muchachos’ – built an empire founded on cocaine that included real estate, racing boats, exotic cars and legitimate businesses to clean the millions of dirty dollars. The offshore powerboat racing circuit was a magnet for drug smugglers in the late 70s and 80s. Many of the biggest smugglers were also champion racers, akin to how NASCAR was formed out of the Prohibition-era drivers who evaded the law.

“The racing boats weren’t just for fun in the sun either; it was a clever ‘hidden in plain sight’ scheme,” said Christian Cipollini, the author of Lucky Luciano: Mysterious Tales of a Gangland Legend. “Racing boats were often used to run dope from the Bahamas to Florida, therefore making racing boats part of their legitimate endeavors was a smart way to perhaps throw off any suspicion of why they owned so many racing boats.” Falcon and Magluta raced under the Team Seahawk name in South Florida.

“Falcon also raced under the name Team Cougar,” said Deitch. “Some boats, like a 26-foot (eight-metre) racing boat that was for sale on Craigslist a few years back, were built specifically for Falcon. As avid participants in the sport, Magluta won a number of national championships and Falcon won a Florida Keys offshore race in the mid 1980s.”

One of Falcon’s speedboats was named Rum and Coke. That was his favourite drink too, and he would tip the waitresses at The Mutiny $100 each when they brought him his drink. Willie Falcon and Sal Magluta were by this time the biggest cocaine dealers in Miami, with a direct line to some of the biggest figures in the Medellin cartel.

**SMUGGLERS EXTRAORDINAIRE**

Cipollini told Real Crime, ‘Magluta and Falcon, aka Los Muchachos or ‘The Boys’, were the living, breathing manifestation of what a film like Scarface or a show like Miami Vice was built upon. Two Cuban immigrants in Miami [who] quickly begin to live the American underworld dream. According to one of the prosecutors at the time, Willie Falcon and Sal Magluta were the reigning ‘kings of cocaine’ in Miami and responsible for importing 75 tons of the high-priced powder in the United States from the late 1970s up to the time of their arrest in 1991.”

With a fleet of speedboats that the Coast Guard couldn’t catch ferrying cocaine from the Bahamas to Florida, the Muchachos controlled a huge conglomerate, a cocaine enterprise that rivaled the top corporations in the world, if not surpassed them due to the sheer enormity of their cash flow. With excess money they assembled fleets of planes and boats to supply and feed America’s monstrous cocaine habit, flooding the country in the 1980s with Colombian yayo. With large sums of cash available, greedy banks sided the drug lords by laundering their money through dummy corporations and offshore accounts.

“The most ostentatious thing they could do was just order cases and cases of Dom Perignon and pour it into a hot tub
THE MUCHACHOS CONTROLLED A HUGE CONGLOMERATE; A COCAINE ENTERPRISE THAT RIVALLED THE TOP CORPORATIONS IN THE WORLD

and jump in naked with groupies,” said Farzac. “It was the most democratising thing, cash. A rage to riches Cuban or Venezuelan – who would not get the time of day at this exclusive club – got in, because once you’re a coke kingpin, once you have that kind of money, all sorts of women would sleep with you, all sorts of celebs would party with you. These guys rubbed shoulders with Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, Fleetwood Mac, The Cars. That cash was the ultimate equaliser.”

Falcon and Magluta kept a whole floor at The Mutiny for themselves. They would throw wild parties with dozens of women, who got high on cocaine and drunk on champagne and did whatever the drug lords wanted. They were royalty at the hotel, living out the rock star dream. The Muchachos used the hotel as a business office, to entertain, and most importantly to party.

“The flashiness was the Cubans and the ‘gringo’ hangers-on,” said Farzac. “The Colombians, when they did go to The Mutiny, were not flashy people. They were much more businesslike, and it was life or death for them. Dealers would throw a lot of cash around and make it abundantly clear to everybody that money was no object. They’d have a ton of Dom Pérignon and Perrier-Jouët on the table, paying cash and tipping the waiter $200.”

LENGTHY LEGAL PROCEEDINGS

The Muchachos thought they could buy their way out of anything. After all, it was America, right? In a capitalist nation money rules the roost. But it wasn’t always true, as Falcon and Magluta found out. With operations in multiple states, they were solidifying their empire and bringing in
history,” said Deitch. “While the prosecution thought they had a strong case, the jury came back with acquittals on all charges. It later came out that Falcon and Magluta had bribed three of the jurors, including the foreman (who got $500,000). The jury foreman was actually convicted of taking the bribe in 1999 and sent to prison.”

Indicted in 1997, the pair were acquitted in 1999. The Muchachos had unlimited funds to fight the police. They would use their billions to buy their freedom if necessary. But the police re-indicted them on gun and money laundering charges after the acquittals. The proceedings got ugly as defense lawyers accused the prosecution of having a personal agenda in regards to Falcon and Magluta. Over a 12-year period $2.1 billion in property was seized from Los Muchachos, but the police weren’t even making a dent in their operation.

“Falcon and Magluta were in prison on lesser charges for brief stints in the late 90s,” Deitch told Real Crime, “but were put on trial again in the early 2000s. Magluta was convicted in 2002 of money laundering related to drug trafficking activities. He was sentenced to 205 years in prison. He was 62 at the time.” Falcon ended up with a sweetheart deal, pleading out for only 20 years. He was lucky, considering his partner in effect got a life sentence. The police suspected that Los Muchachos were ordering hits from their jail cells, trying to eliminate potential witnesses, but those allegations were hard to prove since Falcon and Magluta were never in that part of the game; they prided themselves on being gentleman gangsters.

THE AFTERMATH

Falcon pleaded guilty to laundering money used to finance corruption at his 1996 trial. Falcon told the court that he used cocaine profits to pay off jurors and witnesses. The judge was initially reluctant to accept the 20-year sentence for the drug kingpin, but she finally relented and even called Falcon a gentleman in court. Falcon did his 20 years in federal prison and was released in 2017 only to be swooped on by immigration officials who wanted to deport him back to Cuba. But given the current political landscape in the country, that would be tantamount to sending Falcon to his death.

“During their reign as cocaine cowboys, Falcon and Magluta sent money to anti-Castro paramilitary groups and were also alleged to have been involved with funding CIA-backed anti-Castro efforts in the 1980s,” said Deitch. “There are even links between associates of Falcon and Magluta and infamous anti-Castro figures like Luis Posada Carriles, a CIA asset and veteran of the Bay of Pigs invasion, and Watergate burglar Frank Sturgis. Posada Carriles and Sturgis were once part of the CIA’s Operation 40, a 60s-era anti-Castro paramilitary group that also included Mafioso Johnny Roselli.”

With changes during the Obama administration opening diplomatic relations with Cuba, as well as ending the ‘wet foot/dry foot’ policy giving Cubans who landed on US soil a path to citizenship, there’s been an opening for immigration officials to deport violent Cuban felons – something the US was unable to do when diplomatic relations were nonexistent. Falcon is a permanent resident but not a US citizen. Since he was convicted of a felony he can be deported back to his home country – in this case Cuba. It’s unclear whether the current Castro regime would even take him back. They
“THE POINT IS THE GOVERNMENT IS TRYING TO DEPORT HIM TO CUBA, WHICH IS ALMOST LIKE A DEATH SENTENCE”

FREEDOM DENIED
FALCON THOUGHT HE WAS GETTING OUT IN 2017, BUT THE GOVERNMENT HAD OTHER IDEAS

Falcon is a permanent resident of the United States, but he made an error back in the day that is currently the source of his immigration troubles. He never completed the naturalisation process. Prior to the current relationship between the US and Cuba, most Cubans who served time in American prisons were permitted to remain in the country after jail. But the current situation is not in Falcon’s favour, because the US labels him a ‘convicted felon’ and technically not a US citizen. Cuba now considers taking back people on a case-by-case basis.

An interesting side note is that Falcon’s brother, who had been in hiding for the past two decades, was just picked up by federal marshals in April 2017, living under an assumed name in Kissimmee, just outside Orlando. Now he is in federal prison and Falcon is most likely going to end up in a Cuban jail, if he is not killed outright.

would have to agree for it to happen.

“Falcon got out of jail in June [2017],” said Farzad. “His brother was caught after being on the lam [run] for 25 years and effectively gave himself up in April. I believe it was so the government doesn’t take revenge on his brother. Maybe he fell on his sword, but the point is the government is trying to deport him right now to Cuba, which is almost like a death sentence for a person who left Cuba as a young child, who left Castro, who was an anti-communist activist and a doper. It’s amazing to me that this Willie and Sal story continues to dominate the headlines in Miami.”

Through the spotlight of documentaries such as Cocaine Cowboys, cocaine gangsters like Willie Falcon have come into vogue, their stories remaining relevant in culture and drug lore. “Look how heavy Miami Vice is syndicated. Look how many times Scarface has been re-released. Look how much it influenced Breaking Bad,” said Farzad. “I think Saddam Hussein named his front company Tony Montana Enterprises or something. This is a pop culture totem, and we have a lot of evidence that it was heavily influenced by this club and the dopers there.

“You see the size and textures of all these people, who you were led to believe were just coke-headed monsters. But it works both ways. They wanted nothing to do with the film Scarface when it was filmed in 1982 and 1983 in Miami, but now that Scarface has kind of created a life of its own, been quoted on Sports Center, and it’s been re-released a thousand times, a lot of these guys want to come forward and say, ‘You know what, I think that was based on me, man.’ And most of the Miami drug dealers that have been depicted in film are based on the cocaine gangster Willie Falcon, a legend in the chronicles of the dope game.”