The Search for 'Sam': Why It Took So Long

By Robert Daley

"...Is the New York detective—once considered the world's most sophisticated—no longer able to cope with 'modern' crimes?..."

"The only way this case is going to be broken is if some uniformed cop trips over the guy."

—Detective Robert Leuci
August 6, 1977

□ On July 29, 1976, Donna Lauria was shot dead by a .44 caliber revolver as she sat with a girl friend in a parked car at night in the Bronx. A year and two days later, Stacy Moskowitz and Robert Violante were shot by the same gun and, therefore, presumably, by the same gunman, his twelfth and thirteenth victims.

Finally, fully 54 weeks after Donna Lauria was slain on her way home from a disco, the police had nabbed a man—David Berkowitz—who they are convinced is the Son of Sam, the notorious .44 caliber killer.

A single gun. A single killer. A case that lingered unsolved for so long as to raise questions that New York's thousands of unsolved lesser crimes—the city's normal harvest, so to speak, of every week, month, year—do not raise.

Why had so many detectives failed? Whose fault was it?

What was missing? Was it training, equipment, talent, luck?

The city was irritated and afraid. Is the New York detective—once considered the world's most sophisticated—no longer able to cope with "modern" New York crimes?

Novelist Robert Daley was at one time a deputy police commissioner.

First of all, the "sophisticated" New York detective of the past was mostly a myth. Often he acquired his coveted gold shield based not on how good he was or how hard he worked, but rather on whom he knew and how well. His sponsor was referred to in police jargon as his "rabbi" or "hook." No training even singled out interrogation techniques as requiring special study, and a good many detectives decided that the best approach was to hurl the suspect over the desk a few times.

Until very recently the Detective Bureau was a kind of feudal dukedom ruled by the chief of detectives, against whom police commissioners moved only at political peril. Influence-peddling in the chief's court prevailed over police skills as late as the tenure of Chief of Detectives Frederick Lussen (1966–71).

Not until Patrick Murphy (1970–73) had been commissioner for more than a year did the detective dukedom begin to collapse. Murphy, growing in confidence day by day, ended the rabbi system by establishing "career-path guidelines" for entry into detective ranks. Henceforth all patrolmen aiming for the bureau had to spend two years in a high-crime precinct, followed by two more years as so-called white-shield detectives in organized-crime control or similar duty.

Murphy had never been a detective, had always resented detective privilege, and in addition had once been a lieutenant in the Police Academy. Under Murphy the bureau was whittled down in size from about 3,000 in 1971 to an elite of 1,800 today. And classroom training became mandatory. Special two-week courses are given several times a year now in each of the specialties: murder, rape, arson, etc. These courses, which have become famous in law enforcement, draw students even from distant police forces. Meanwhile, the criminal-investigator course, which all New York detectives must take, has been scrupulously and even militantly updated every year. It is now three weeks (105 hours) in length. The instructors are law-enforcement stars from the courts, the labs, even from other police agencies. Detectives are taught not only that such specialists exist but how to contact them for help.

"...The public called in the names of 7,000 suspects, all of them false leads except, perhaps, one—David Berkowitz of Yonkers..."

Every police subject is covered, from the violent to the theoretical. Detectives are taught even incidental skills that were never taught them before: how to take notes and how to handle Nikon cameras and the new, fast films.

By far the largest segment of the instruction—and this was developed only last year under an LEAA grant —is devoted to interrogation, which in the course syllabus is at last recognized as the detective's "most important skill." An outside firm was called in, and the course was developed—an unheard-of thing—around research done by civilians. For sixteen hours, detectives now study different interviewing methods, and they are taught how and when to use them. They then practice on each other in front of video-tape machines, and they criticize their own techniques afterward.

Despite upgraded training, detective morale has been terrible. The department has been shrinking since 1971 and the general feeling was that cutbacks had gone too far. For 26 months ending only last summer, no new detectives were made at all. And the survivors are getting older—and paunchier. The average detective's age is now 45, and many of the best of the city's sleuths have now taken their pensions and resigned for more lucrative jobs in private industry.

However, low morale was remarkably absent in the search for Son of Sam. No one inside the department supposes that detectives working that case suffered from it. Professional detectives are hunters by nature, and this was big game they were after—the biggest—and the adrenaline was flowing. This is what their lives are all about, and all were filled with the hunter's lust.

Or so it was said.

In any event, whether the adrenaline was flowing or not, they were not having much success.

Major investigations have become incredibly complex. In the past, whichever squad "caught" a case worked it to the end. It was considered insulting to supersede a local squad or commander by sending in an elite team, and many cases were worked to the end by less than the department's best. But the major-case squad, formed in 1971, has been superseding routinely ever since. In addition, new squads were formed and continue to be formed in areas of special expertise.

The 300-man Son of Sam task force under Deputy Inspector Tim Dowd, though bigger than most American police departments, was merely one more special squad. It would be disbanded the moment Sam was caught. If he were never caught, then whenever he disappeared from public consciousness. Historically such maniacs do disappear. Jack the Ripper was never captured, nor was the more recent San Francisco Zodiac killer.

Dowd's job, just from a paperwork standpoint, was awesome. The public had called in the names of 7,000 suspects; all of them were false leads except one.

One caller three weeks ago was old Sam Carr, who runs a Yonkers answering service. Some crazy neighbor had shot Carr's dog and the old man was convinced the assailant was the .44 caliber killer. A detective told Carr he would put the complaint in the hopper. No one called the old man back to check out the suspect—an eccentric 24-year-old postal worker named David Berkowitz.

To keep 7,000 names straight, to assign each team of detectives, to file each result—these details alone consumed vast manpower. Dowd's chain of command included an administrative captain and an administrative lieutenant; two field captains, one commanding Dowd's detectives, the other his uniformed men; plus two detective lieutenants and four detective sergeants. Additional lieutenants commanded a number of smaller components.

Incredibly, only about 1,200 names had been checked out before last Wednesday. Dowd could probably have used more men. The trouble was he probably couldn't have handled any more men.

The paperwork was pure drudgery. Obviously it is essential, but it made a different sound than the snapping on of handcuffs.

In the old days detectives were not allowed to own, much less distribute, business cards bearing their names and phone numbers. The police hierarchy was suspicious and fearful of the outside world, and read all kinds of corruption opportunities into the use of simple business cards. Citizens might feel obliged to hand the card back with a $10 bill attached. Or, having kept the card, might use it fraudulently to effect entrée into other police circles.

The street detectives certainly didn't object. A witness couldn't hurt a detective whose name he did not know—nor contact him again either, if new information arose.

But in 1977 business cards are routinely distributed by detectives. The cards contain not only the detective's extension number, but also the number assigned to the investigation in question. The caller, in theory, can reach the correct detective, and the correct case folder, at once.

If the line isn't busy.

In the wake of the Stacy Moskowitz murder two weeks ago, the telephone company recorded 1,000 busy signals an hour on Inspector Dowd's lines. A good many of the calls that did get through came from citizens, most of them extremely loquacious, who wished to contribute not information but advice—usually advice gleaned from some recent TV cop show.

Whatever the public's belief, fingerprints are virtually never found on guns and at crime scenes prints don't abound. Detectives feel themselves lucky to lift a single unsmudged print of a single finger. With this single print, in the past, they could most often do nothing. There was no way to relate the single print to department files except by eye —and there were and are millions of prints in those files.

Time marches on. Gadgets—if you can call them gadgets—now exist. In Queens a detective classifies a print, feeds the information into a machine called Miraquic, which will then display every print it has on file that shows the same characteristics. The prints are compared manually, and the perpetrator's card found—if it is there. At the moment this system works only in Queens and it is programmed only with local Queens criminals, mostly burglars.

On the fifth floor of police headquarters, a different system occupies most of three rooms. It is a McDonnell Douglas laser scanner. The laser beam scans a single print and matches it against four fingerprint cards a second.

Again, the perpetrator's card must be in the file first. He must have been, previously, a criminal. But there is no proof that Son of Sam ever committed a single criminal act apart from the numerous murders.

There is a good deal more space-age gadgetry. Voice-print machines are being tried. In Manhattan, a system known as CATCH is being tested. The ma-

BLUMRICH

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chine is programmed with microfilmed mug shots of known criminals. If the victim or witness can provide a description of the criminal in a specific case, this description is fed into the machine by numbered code—and out pop, say, 20 or 30 photos matching that description. It is a good deal quicker and less mind-numbing than making the witness plow through hundreds of photos in an album. Again, Son of Sam's photo had to be in the machine first, before CATCH could catch him. Presumably the CATCH technicians never turned up the name Berkowitz.

On the eighth floor of the Police Academy, ballistics detectives now examine about 16,000 bullets a year—32 of them during the past 54 weeks from the .44 caliber Charter Arms revolver belonging to Son of Sam.

There are no laser scanners in ballistics, no automated search techniques at all. Ballistics is the science of matching a test bullet to one recovered from a corpse or a wall. The one bullet is pure, with perfect grooves. The other is to a greater or lesser degree deformed —most look like a mushroom—and no machine has yet been invented that can cope with these deformities. McDonnell Douglas has tried, NASA has tried— for some reason space researchers are also in the forefront of criminal research—and Grumman is trying now. One new technique, unsatisfactory so far, is to bombard the two bullets with colors and then match the colors.

Meanwhile, bullets are classified by caliber and by "twist," and after that by memory and by eyesight. Captain Charles Rorke, commander of the Scientific Research Division, contends that 16,000 bullets a year is "not so many bullets that we can't do it manually." Rorke's men had the only real success before the killing of Stacy Moskowitz. They matched Sam's second murder to his first, and then they matched all subsequent ones, and they managed to determine from one or two mutilated bullets the make and model of Sam's gun.

For 54 weeks all this had meant to them was more work, for they had to check out every .44 caliber Charter Arms revolver—hundreds of them— that Dowd's detectives tracked down, none belonging to Sam.

Elsewhere in the Police Academy stands a scanning electron microscope that cost $125,000. It makes very large blowups of very small things. It can be used to compare two pieces of wire, for instance, or two pieces of hair.

When used with an energy-dispersive X-ray attachment, the electron microscope gives a quantitative and qualitative analysis of minute particles. It can identify globules of barium and antimony on the trigger finger and hand of a shooter, provided he is caught quickly enough and his hand swabbed with nitric acid. It is also useful in determining from residue on the target the distance at which a shot was fired. It can determine whether particles around a hole in clothing came from a bullet passing through or from moths.

The crime lab is full of new machines, all of them marvelous. They just weren't, under the circumstances, marvelous enough. They couldn't give up the names and addresses of the killer; in the last few weeks the scores of searching detectives were interested in almost nothing else.

The Son of Sam case seemed to many detectives, on the surface, simply hopeless. Said Chief of Detectives John Keenan early last week: "There are three possibilities: first, the unlikely prospect that he will give himself up. Second, and this is difficult to contemplate, that he stumbles and is caught in the act. The third is that we get him through investigative work."

Then Keenan said: "He can strike at will, whenever and wherever he wants, and for no particular reason. He's holding all the cards."

Said Inspector Dowd: "There are investigative ways, but they are long, long-term things."

Dowd knew more about Sam than he has admitted. He may have had Sam's fingerprint. He appears to have believed Sam once drove a taxi, for recently he sent two female detectives —judged better able to withstand such drudgery than men—down to the hack bureau to comb through tens of thousands of hack licenses.

But Dowd's main and virtually only hope was his 7,000-name bank account. If the Son of Sam was in there, then one morning whichever detectives constituted that day's team would be handed it, and they would begin to learn everything about the suspect that could be learned from a distance. They would check other police agencies looking for a criminal past. They would ask the armed forces for his service record, if any. They would turn up his driver's license, his telephone number, his credit rating.

If they found any evidence anywhere of a gun, then their blood would begin to race, and they would move up closer. They would wait outside the suspect's house, study his face and demeanor, and then they would confront him.

Dozens of times a suspect, once confronted, provided a tight alibi for one or more of the killings. The detectives apologized, slumped away, and marked one more dossier closed.

Even if the suspect could not provide an alibi, he could not be arrested. Detectives can only go on tailing indefinitely—which is terribly expensive. Terribly inconclusive too. Three shifts a day. At least two detectives per shift.

One detective said soberly: "All we can do is keep everybody busy and hope we're doing something right."

At every crime scene, not just Sam's murder sites, you can see them if you look—flocks of cops noting down the license numbers of every parked car in the vicinity. This is one of the oldest and most automatic investigatory techniques known to New York detectives. They have been doing it since the dawn of the age of the getaway car.

The reasoning is obvious. Perhaps the criminal, disturbed by something, was unable or unwilling to go back to his car, was forced to leave the area on foot.

But Sam did drive away each time, and all this work seemed wasted.

A parallel and equally automatic technique is to attempt to locate any cars parked nearby at the time of the crime, but not afterward. One interrogates witnesses—"Did you see any car leaving, a squeal of tires, perhaps?" And, since the criminal has almost always driven up and then departed in a hurry, one researches the parking-summons files. One tracks down every illegally parked car within walking distance on the night of the crime. One gathers facts about the car and its owner, and the less business it seems to have had in that spot at that time, the faster a detective's heart begins to beat.

And so, in the end, a traffic cop did in fact trip over Son of Sam. Unable to find a parking space for his Ford Galaxie on the night he killed Stacy Moskowitz, he had parked several blocks away, too close to a hydrant.

The catch—modern training and space-age gadgetry to the contrary— was routine. ▬

The Educated Guess—
Hit or Myth?

"...'This specimen is terrifying. I will certainly become a target if I come close in detail,' said the handwriting expert..."

This detailed characterization of Son of Sam was produced by an internationally recognized handwriting analyst and was delivered to us by courier only two hours before David Berkowitz was arrested. Our graphologist is one of the very few experts capable of working accurately with the printed word: The analyst spent eighteen years unmasking espionage cases for a government agency; has worked with both police and large law firms identifying criminals, many of whom are now behind bars; has published 40 books on graphology in six languages; and has over 45 years' experience.

Within one hour of beginning work on a copy of the letter sent to Jimmy Breslin (excerpt right), the graphologist called to say, "This specimen is terrifying. In all my years of work I have never encountered so dangerous a character. Before I go any further I must have your assurance that I will not be identified as the person who analyzed this writing. I will certainly become a target if I come close in any detail."

Judge for yourself how close this analyst came:

ALL THE GUYS WORKING
HE CASE A NEW PAIR OF
S IF I CAN GET UP THE
Y.

SON OF SAM

The person who wrote this letter is an extremely dangerous and emotionally seriously disturbed individual of above-average although not brilliant intelligence. This is a male with some experience in life, suggesting that he is between the ages of 25 and 35. He was brought up in an English-speaking country, and the formation of his *4* and his *8* suggest that he could be of Canadian background. Although a training in mechanical drawing in the States would teach him to use this type of numbering, it is more frequently found in Canadian schoolbooks. He had some type of religious training as a child, and his formal education goes at least as far as high school. He could have learned some medium-level profession, probably of a mechanical nature because, as the formation of his letters and the pressure of his writing show, he has a pronounced manual dexterity. He undoubtedly has one or several other handwritings which are more spontaneous and expressive of his character than this sample's careful printing. The writer is hiding his personality behind a façade of print, but a number of traits can be deduced:

The text printed here has been edited for readability only. No details, either right or wrong, have been added or deleted.

In quiet moments he is able to think clearly and logically, although the contents of his thoughts may be weird or threatening. He can be systematic in his approach and is extremely articulate when expressing himself. He is an alert, astute, and careful observer of details and can readily piece together information he has read or heard. He should be able to handle numbers and calculate quite well. In a job he can be quite meticulous, although he may do it in his own style. He is persistent and has considerable patience. Whatever he does he executes with great deliberation and caution. He likes to work alone, resenting any interference. It is quite possible that he is currently working on a job such as mechanics or accounting.

This person is emotionally immature and extremely complex. He has a paranoid personality, is self-centered, and has a strongly developed ego with a powerful but unconscious desire to attract attention. He is suffering from intense feelings of inferiority and anxiety that are probably due to unfortunate childhood experiences, and which he tries to repress by assuming a self-assured and courageous demeanor. He is both defensive and resentful, and has an unusually strong amount of aggression that requires an intermittent outlet.

Sexually this man is ambivalent—he has leanings toward his own sex,

but is unaware of this or unable to admit it to himself, and so feels sexually frustrated and is compulsively searching for satisfaction.

This person has two very different aspects to his personality: The one is his façade—calm, composed, fairly reasonable, even smiling behavior. The other is a man propelled by compulsive urges to act out his anger through extremely aggressive actions, which could be as drastic as killing. These explosive actions provide him with a certain satisfaction, which he remembers later, particularly as it has (in his mind) boosted his feelings of self-importance. The targets of his explosive actions are probably symbols of female images (mother or girl friend) who have thwarted him in the past and wounded his pride in an almost irreparable manner. I would not be surprised if this man masturbates after these aggressive actions.

This man feels haunted and persecuted, and has developed a strong need for safety and self-protection. At the slightest indication of real or imaginary attack, he will strike out at the person he considers to be his aggressor. He has no compunction as to the means he uses, but his manual dexterity suggests that he would use a gun.

He lives in a state of reversed religious values in which the underworld—Hades—has taken over. He has formed a religion based on a synthesis of the cross, which symbol serves to justify his deeds, and the sex symbols, his own personal justification. This joint symbol appears in the letter with a list of fictitious names—possibly his imaginary disciples. His inner mental state is so severely disturbed that he maybe hears voices—like the voice of "Sam"—which command his aggressive acts. I do not believe that this man's father was called Sam, but that Sam is his "god" and by calling himself Son of Sam he becomes the "son of god." With these justifications he feels no remorse about his killings.

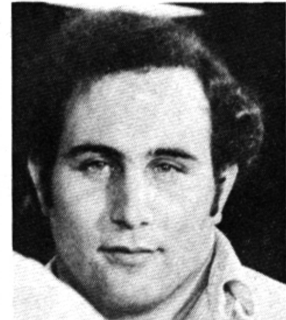
Physically this man is large and quite strong. From the handwriting I deduce a sociopathic personality living the life of a recluse, whose contacts with other people are restricted and lack any emotional content. He may have found an acceptable social niche—a nice apartment, possibly even marriage—but he is most secretive and is not likely to confide in anybody. This and the fact that when he goes out on his dangerous escapades he instinctively covers his tracks carefully are part of his automatic self-protective mechanism. He is not a man to arouse any suspicion among his neighbors. He will indeed be extremely difficult to track down. ■

The Innocent Face Of Evil

UPI

Early composite sketch: December 9, 1976.

Latest composite sketch: August 9, 1977.



The accused, David Berkowitz: August 11, 1977.

Veteran police officers did not expect the Son of Sam drawing to help much. Like the personality profiles that psychologists often publish in the hunt for a mass killer, an artist's sketches seldom do more than placate the public. Unless the artist works with a calm witness who has had a very good look, the sketch gets distorted by the sense of horror at the killer's acts.

The Son of Sam profile is a classic example. By the second portrait, he was visibly a creep. One look at that drawing and you'd never suspect David Berkowitz, 24, the cherub working at the Bronx General Post Office. The picture is a psychological interpretation of a mad killer.

An occasional success, a hit or near miss now and then, keeps alive the myth that artists and psychologists can help when hard police work fails. The biggest success in the history of such efforts came 21 years ago in New York. Stumped in their search for the Mad Bomber, George Metesky, detectives turned to psychiatrist James A. Brussel.

"He goes out of his way to seem perfectly proper, a regular man," Brussel told them. "He wears no ornament, no jewelry, no flashy ties or clothes. He is quiet, polite, methodical, prompt. . . . One more thing: When you catch him he'll be wearing a double-breasted suit. And it will be buttoned."

Mad Bomber Metesky, when caught, fitted almost every detail of Brussel's profile, down to the double-breasted suit that he kept neatly buttoned.

But a full committee of psychiatrists and psychologists failed in their efforts to profile the Boston Strangler. They even concluded that the strangler was two killers, but neither bore close resemblance to Albert DeSalvo, the married construction worker who finally confessed to choking both old and young women.

Among mass killers, Son of Sam resembles Edmund Emil Kemper III, self-described as the "Co-ed Killer" of Santa Cruz, California. He began his bloody career as a child by torturing and killing animals, and later fantasized about killing his mother. While still a boy, he would sneak around the streets at night to stare at women and fantasize about making love with them. But even then, his fantasies turned to killing them. The fantasies became reality. In one year, between the springs of 1972 and 1973, he shot, stabbed, and strangled eight women before cutting off his mother's head and killing a friend of hers.

Stanford University psychologist Donald T. Lunde, a murder and sex researcher, reported in *Psychology Today* that sexual murderers "rarely have criminal records for lesser sex offenses such as exhibitionism or voyeurism, nor are they homosexuals. If they have a previous record, it is most likely for offenses of burglary. These earlier offenses against property appear to be symbolic rehearsals for the later ones against persons."

Once a mass killer is caught, psychologists and police can quickly spot the peculiar ideas and experiences that led to his bloody madness. We would all be nervous about a man, even one with a fresh and innocent look, who takes orders from a dog. But until patient police work connects the face with the deed, we imagine the killer to be a gaunt degenerate who in no way looks like us or shares our common quirks.

In the Bronx General Post Office cafeteria, Theresa Graziano ate lunch with David Berkowitz and talked about mundane things like the hard work. Though terrified for months by Son of Sam, Ms. Graziano never connected her colleague with the mass murderer. "He talked," she recalls, "like anyone else."

—T. George Harris