

Philly's Underworld: A Complicated and Fascinating Melting Pot

[Note: This was originally posted in December 2010 and has been updated in September, November, and December 2019, and in January 2020]

Far from the simplistic treatment often afforded organized crime in the media, the underworld commonly consists of various groups operating various rackets and affording various services. At times these groups compete to monopolize a territory or market, but more often than not they find themselves operating peacefully beside – if not in concert with – each other. The reasons for harmony in the underworld are numerous and most are fairly obvious, especially the desire to avoid attracting the attention of law enforcement. Importantly, savvy groups also befriend seeming rivals because illicit entrepreneurs are constantly in need of funds, products, and services – often at a moment's notice, and must rely upon fellow criminals for things like moving hot money, street-level financing and credit, easy access to narcotics and other goods to offset product lost or stolen or seized by authorities, etc.

These inter-relationships were exhibited time and again in Philadelphia during organized crime's heyday in the city. The 1960s, 70s, and early 1980s saw members of Philadelphia's predominant Italian-American crime syndicate, the Bruno Family, work in coordination with the city's loosely-defined Greek and Irish mobs, and especially with the city's more organized and notorious (and self-named) Black Mafia. It was also during these times that mobsters of various backgrounds allied themselves with union bosses, affording the involved parties with an assortment of benefits. Such patron-client

networks embody the fabric of organized crime.

Though I have spoken and written extensively about this phenomenon, the topic occurred to me recently when I was informed the book *I Heard You Paint Houses* by Charles Brandt was being made into a film.



The adaptation of the book, which tells the story of the late Wilmington, Delaware Teamster leader Frank “The Irishman” Sheeran, involves the unreal combination of Martin Scorsese, Robert DeNiro, Al Pacino, and Joe Pesci. Wow. Regardless of how true to history *I Heard* is, the film, whose title is now *The Irishman*, should at least be entertaining.* Critics have been raving about the picture and the 41 reviews to date on Rotten Tomatoes earn it a perfect 100% score. It is slated for a November 1, 2019 release. *I have never been a fan of the book *as history*, and thus appreciated this critical assessment of the film project and especially this critique re concerns over accuracy (having nothing to do with cinematography, etc.).

In real life, one event perfectly captured the odd times and circumstances surrounding Frank Sheeran vis-a-vis Philly racketeers: “Frank Sheeran Appreciation Night” in October 1974. Held at the Latin Casino in Cherry Hill, New Jersey,

the event consisted of the following who's who at the time: Sheeran was joined on the dais by Philadelphia Mayor Frank Rizzo, former Teamsters head Jimmy Hoffa, Roofer's Union Local 30 head John McCullough, legendary civil rights leader Cecil Moore, and former Philadelphia District Attorney F. Emmett Fitzpatrick; the front table had upstate PA mob boss Russell Bufalino seated with his close friend, Philly mob boss Angelo Bruno; and assorted gangsters populated the surrounding tables. To make this still more surreal, Jerry Vale was the evening's entertainment. Sheeran, of course, would soon be tied to Hoffa's July 1975 disappearance. Here is a photo from Sheeran Appreciation Night (Rizzo is shaking Hoffa's hand, with McCullough second from right and Moore at far right):



I wrote briefly about Sheeran's role in Philly's underworld milieu in *Black Brothers, Inc.*, including and especially his close relationship with Roofer's Union boss John McCullough (along with much discussion about those identified above re: Frank Sheeran Appreciation Night because each played a role in Philly Black Mafia history). Former *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter George Anastasia put together a great "Mob Scene" vid clip about a decade ago regarding McCullough, who was murdered in December 1980 as part of an infamous underworld dispute. Alas, the clip is apparently no longer available online. According to at least one media account, the McCullough murder is part of the soon-to-be-released film.

