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Last testament of Fort Lauderdale's Jon Roberts

December 29, 2011 | By Chauncey Mabe, Correspondent

Death came for Jon Roberts, the infamous cocaine cowboy, on Dec. 28 at age 63, after a long battle with cancer. But his public career as a charming monster is just beginning

A true-crime memoir, "American Desperado" (Crown; \$28), written with journalist Evan Wright, has just been published. In Hollywood, director Peter Berg and star Mark Wahlberg are developing a movie based on his exploits.

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Dying at his ease in Fort Lauderdale in the company of a devoted younger spouse and his 11-year-old son Julian, product of an earlier marriage, was an improbable end for a man who never repudiated his lifelong philosophy that "evil is stronger than good."

"How many times have I encountered a crooked politician who wants to establish he's a nice guy, or a killer who wants you to think he's a good guy at heart," says Wright. "I was fascinated because here is a guy who has done monstrous things and he's not trying to portray himself as a nice guy or a victim."

As Roberts tells Wright in "American Desperado," "I might be a sociopath. Most of the time I've been on this earth I've had no regard for human life. That's been the key to my success."

If "American Desperado" is to be believed, Jon Roberts beat people to death in New York, skinned enemy POWs alive in Vietnam, and helped a future CIA agent murder famed mobster Meyer Lansky's stepson in Miami – with Lansky's approval.

Roberts first came to national attention as one of the stars of "Cocaine Cowboys," a Miami-produced documentary that was a surprise hit in 2006. The film details the early 1980s, when Miami became a nearly lawless place awash in cocaine, violence and corruption.

As an American representative of the Medellin Cartel, Roberts helped import some \$2 billion worth of cocaine into South Florida, working with infamous figures like Albert San Pedro, Pablo Escobar, Bobby Seal, Max Mermelstein and Bobby Erra.

"He's a killer," says Wright, author of the acclaimed Iraq War book, "Generation Kill." "The notion that Jon is a monster because he kills people doesn't disqualify a person in my code of life. He's a killer —

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let's move on from there. Let's find out more."

Their mutual agent, who wanted a quickie book to capitalize on the movie interest, introduced Wright to Roberts. At first it looked like an easy paycheck for Wright, "three months" on an "as-told-to book." Instead, it turned into a three-year project that brought the L.A.-based Wright to South Florida eight times.

"The book's gestation was a lot longer than we anticipated," says Rick Horgan, Wright's editor at Crown. "A lot of journalists would have just taken down dictation, but Evan felt it was equally his book. The stories were so incredible and over the top I think Evan felt obligated to check them out."

Horgan says "American Desperado" is the best true-crime book he's been associated with, comparing it to Nicholas Pileggi's "Wiseguy," the 1986 classic made into the film "Goodfellas."

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Most of those "over-the-top" stories added up.

"Everything in the book that happens in Miami is 100 percent true," says Mike Fisten, a retired Miami-Dade homicide detective who was part of the federal task force that cleaned up Miami, arresting Roberts and many others.

That includes the single most explosive thing in the book, Roberts account of the murder of Richard Schwartz, Lansky's stepson, killed in retaliation for the barroom murder of another low-level mob associate. Roberts says the hit was carried out by Enrique "Ricky" Prado — who went on to a career as a high-ranking CIA agent, and later, an executive at Blackwater.

"That story is absolutely true," Fisten says. "I pursued the CIA agent, but I was unable to get him."

'Nothing but evil'

Jon Roberts was born in the Bronx in 1948 as John Riccobono. Both his father and his uncle were members of the Gambino Mafia family. "American Desperado" describes a hellish childhood at the hands of a cruel father and a weak mother.

"I think Jon, from his family upbringing, knew nothing but evil," Fisten says. "His father, his uncle — I think that's all he ever knew. That's his way of life. He thinks it's OK to be that way."

Roberts' father, an illegal alien, was deported to Italy in 1958 and passed out of his son's life. His mother died in 1960. While his sister went on to college and life in the corporate world, Roberts changed his name — Pernell Roberts, star of "Bonanza," was his childhood hero — and went to work for his uncle, by then the Gambino family consigliere.

Arrested for attempted murder while trying to collect a mob debt, Roberts chose war over prison. "When I got to Vietnam they put me in with some guys as bad as me," Roberts says in "American Desperado," "and God Almighty, we went f----- crazy over there. The sickest part of it was, we enjoyed it."

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