Don Hollywood. The Mafia gave the movies material. The movies gave John Gotti a script

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TIME MAGAZINE

Monday, Jun. 17, 2002

John Gotti thought of himself as the Caesar of the Mafia. But he was really its Commodus. As with the emperor in the movie Gladiator, when Gotti took over the Gambino crime family in 1985, some saw his ascension as a step backward for the family. He was muscle, a grunt, an obscure and none-too-bright soldier who wouldn't have become boss if so many of his betters weren't already in jail. So, like Commodus, Gotti, who died of cancer in a prison hospital last week at 61, made up for his shortcomings with entertainments. He threw Fourth of July parties for his neighbors in Queens, N.Y., making himself the toast of the locals. (His folk-heroism was always a peculiarly parochial, New York City phenomenon, like Ed Koch or egg creams.) He made like a mobster out of central casting, plunging into night life wearing $2,000 suits (hence his nickname "the Dapper Don") and taunting the feds by being acquitted three times (hence, "the Teflon Don") before the charges stuck.

The media gladly helped inflate that image. The '80s were the new '20s, and here was its Capone! And Gotti obsessed over his coverage. TIME put an Andy Warhol portrait of him on its cover in 1986, and Gotti framed it in his office. On one surveillance tape, he and his associates can be heard critiquing a TV re-enactment of the Mob hit that brought him to power. Even that hit was cinematic: his predecessor, Paul Castellano, was gunned down in front of Sparks steak house in crowded midtown Manhattan at Christmastime. All Martin Scorsese would have added were credits and a Shirelles song. Good Mob bosses, the ones who lead long careers and die of old age in their own homes, do not act like Mob bosses. Gotti was foolhardy, he was blowhard-y, he talked too proudly and loudly, and the government finally gave him enough blank tape to hang himself. In 1992 he was sent up for murder and racketeering. If his mobster act was his doom, though, it was also his source of legitimacy. Where did he learn what we expect a Mob boss to look like? Well, where did you? Pop culture's fascination with mobsters, in movies, in song, on TV, is older than Gotti was.

But it was his generation of gangsters who truly, deeply returned the fascination, as if they believed what the movies said about their lives more than they believed their lives themselves. The watershed was, of course, Francis Ford Coppola's Godfather films of the 1970s as much a touchstone within the Mob as without. Rudolph Giuliani, the former New York City mayor (and Mob-movie fan), said in his gangbusting prosecutor days that you could tell the difference between surveillance tapes recorded before and after the Godfather movies came out: the hoods started speaking like characters in the films. The
movies that mobsters made possible ended up remaking the mobsters. The reasons that Mob stories resonate with us civilians are well rehearsed: loyalty, honor, family, bada-bing, bada-boom. Their audience, especially men, uses them as a source of secondhand machismo and Machiavellian sooth. What's curious, and a little pathetic, is that the same elements appeal to mobsters. But the movies became an attractive model for them only when real Mob life was on the skids, attacked from without by the feds, eaten from within by rats. The Godfather I and II were nostalgia movies, harking back to the glory years of a racket whose best years were behind it even in the '70s. They held up myths of honor among thieves, we don't sell drugs, we don't kill civilians, we don't, that Gotti and his cronies abandoned, if they ever really existed.

Scorsese's Goodfellas (1990) got closer to the stupidity and venality of Mob life, but wiseguys still embraced it: from Henry Hill's glamorous Copacabana entrance to his ignominy in bland, witness-protection mid-America (where there's no decent red sauce), it told them they were somebodies, and that that beat being nobodies. Today mobsters need Hollywood more than Hollywood needs them. Like the western, the Mafia myth is outlasting its subject. TV's The Sopranos may indulge our power fantasies, but the series is really about the end of empire. (Boss Tony Soprano constantly escapes his woes by losing himself in Mob flicks like Public Enemy.) And the Sopranos' counterparts? They're counting down their twilight days, like the New Jersey DeCavalcantes, caught on tape debating the show's merits and looking for signs that its characters are based on them. "It's not me," one says pitably. "I'm not even existing over there."

Organized crime, of course, lives on: Russians, Chinese, South Americans, embattled but not yet as systemically crushed as the Italian-American Mafia, nor as well discovered by Hollywood. How will we know when they're finished? First they'll get their own movies and TV shows. Then they'll get their own John Gotti. And trust me, we'll hear all about it then.