And the Mob
Who Played Whom?

A Museum Exhibition including artifacts and archives from:

The Liberace Museum Collection

Featuring information from the upcoming book:

“Showman: The Unsung Genius of Liberace”

by Jonathan Warren
Chairman, Liberace Foundation

Presented with an entertaining oral description of each case, with optional Q&A by Jonathan Warren

www.jonathanwarren.me   www.liberace.org
Vladziu Valentino Liberace was a Midwestern child prodigy born to Polish and Italian immigrants in 1919. His mastery of the piano saw him bring down the house as the starring soloist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra by the time he was 20. The life of a renowned concert pianist was a sure thing.

But it bored him.

Beyond the artistry of the orchestral arrangements lay the vision of gleaming excitement that stirred the very soul this soft spoken, impeccably dressed musician. In order to manage two different audiences, he began performing in Chicago under the name “Walter Busterkeys.”

Soon the performance styles blended into the most outlandishly costumed performer in history, playing his own versions of classic piano pieces “with the boring parts cut out,” known mononymously as Liberace.
"I stopped doing concerts and started putting on a show."

By 1955 Liberace was listed by Guinness Book of World Records as "The Highest Paid Entertainer in the World," earning $50,000 per week in the Clover Room of the Riviera Hotel.

Able to play over 6,000 notes in two minutes, Liberace was listed by Ripley's Believe It Or Not as: "The Fastest Musician in the World."

A regular in England, Monaco, Australia and all over the US, Liberace made Las Vegas his primary home by the early 1970's. There his brother, violinist and bandleader George Liberace, his mother and other family members gathered in the warmth of the success of the prodigal son.

By the time he died in Palm Springs, California in 1987, the Liberace estate was worth an Estimated $110 million, the vast majority of which he left to his foundation.

A half dozen books, several films and many tribute artists continue to share his legacy.

And then, there's the back story...
Liberace’s career and legacy crossed paths with the Mob on at least three significant occasions.

Each encounter was dealt with differently by Liberace and his estate, always with extreme cunning, and expert use of his most formidable weapon: the Show itself.
In Manhattan in 1965, a man was arrested impersonating a police detective. He had been shaking down the parents of a runaway youth, from whom he sought payment to send the minor home. The parents got suspicious and called the New York police, causing a real detective to make the arrest of the imposter.

To save himself from serious charges, the perpetrator offered information on a tremendous and landmark crime ring promulgating organized blackmail. A huge nationwide network of nightclub operators, hoteliers, police and more blackmailed closeted, high-profile gay men for millions.

One of these victims was Liberace.

Others included generals, admirals, congressmen, surgeons, professors, deans of universities, and celebrity and television personalities.

Without the ability to identify a particular perpetrator and under strict morals clauses of his performance contracts, Liberace saw nothing to gain and everything to lose in talking to the FBI, and he refused to testify. But his public schedule and keeping quiet about the FBI investigation, as well as the gravitas of his own tremendous national popularity, contributed to bust the case open.

It has since been pointed to as the first time law enforcement fought to protect gay members of society against such violations.
EXHIBIT A

Contents

- Ex. A.1—
  FBI investigation documents enlarged to 3’x5’

- Ex. A.2—
  FBI communications regarding Liberace enlarged to 3’x5’

- Ex. A.3—
  Photos of Liberace and advertisements for his bookings of the era
EXHIBIT ITEM A.1

FBI Investigations

Memorandum

TO: Mr. DeLoach
FROM: J. H. Gale

DATE: June 28, 1966

SUBJECT: COMPROBAND AND EXPOSURE OF HOMOSEXUAL

INTERSTATE TRANSPORTATION IN
AID OF RACKETEERING - EXTORTION

By memorandum dated May 18, 1966, it was recommended, and the Director approved, that Liberace be interviewed in connection with this matter.

In an effort to locate Liberace our Los Angeles Office contacted

Enc. Rm 170 6-28-66 16 JUN 80 91 96
1 - Mr. DeLoach 1 - Mr. Gale
1 - Mr. Wick 1 - Mr. McAndrews
1 - Mr. Rosen
EXHIBIT ITEM A.2

FBI Correspondences

Memorandum to Mr. DeLoach
Re: Compromise and Extortion of Homosexuals

Interstate Transportation in Aid of Racketeering - Extortion

OBSERVATIONS:
In view of comments by
It appears that little or nothing would be gained in interviewing Liberace in connection with this matter.

ACTION:
If approved, the attached airtel will be sent instructing that no interview of Liberace is to be conducted.
EXHIBIT ITEM A.3

Headshot and Programs from 1965
Within the Liberace Museum Collection is a famous pocket watch which Liberace often wore over his cravat on stage. In the official records of the Liberace Foundation, the piece is recorded as having been given to Liberace by the Australian Government.

While on tour in Dallas in 1974, the piece was stolen from a combination-locked jewelry case in Liberace’s room, without any forced entry. The theft was immediately reported to the police, along with the previously estimated value of the piece of $75,000.

The story as told by Liberace himself was that the thief wore the watch, which was recognized by a fan who called the police, leading to the return of the watch.

The FBI file released years later, tells a different story...
According to the FBI file, the piece was sold by the thief to a ‘fence’ in Chicago. The fence, who owned a jewelry store, received a phone call from an associate in Las Vegas, confirming that he had received the piece. The FBI had been surveilling the caller on another case, thus they tapped the call to the fence. When they raided the store of the Chicago fence, they found the Tiffany-made Liberace Watch in his pocket, and many other stolen jewels from around the Country on location. The watch was restored to Liberace with great fanfare in the press.

**But most missed the deeper story.**

FBI files show that the piece was only insured for $5,500, not $75,000. When that information was reported by one or two media outlets, Liberace’s manager answered that Liberace had not had the piece long, and had not yet obtained the insurance he would normally have placed on it.

Most didn’t follow the story further, but when the FBI later returned the piece to Liberace, they required him to disclose its genesis and value. He happily informed them that he had bought it from a display at a second hand jewelry store in Las Vegas. It was an antique. It didn’t work and wasn’t even for sale, but he liked it and took it to a jeweler to have the iconic “L” emblazoned on it in tiny diamonds. The name of the jeweler who modified it is mysteriously redacted from the FBI file. Several of Liberace’s friends have said that they believe it was Mordechai at The Jewelers of Las Vegas. The associate of the fence who called him in Chicago from Las Vegas, strangely not redacted, was Herbie. Some believe him to have been the notorious Herbert “Fat Herbie” Blitzstein, known to later form the Las Vegas “Hole-in-the-wall” gang jewel thieves.
According to the FBI file, The moment the Liberace Tiffany Watch was discovered stolen, Liberace’s manager made two calls. One was to the police. The other was to the Associated Press, to announce the theft of such a valuable, famed piece from the hotel room of the superstar, Liberace. Over 40 years later, the perception has become reality.

Actually the Lore is part of the show. The Liberace Tiffany Watch, stolen in an elaborate, multi-party interstate organized crime cat burglar heist, thought to be worth $75,000, was in fact estimated by Liberace himself to be worth no more than $5,000 - even after the value had been enhanced by diamonds and celebrity. By the time that disclosure was released by the FBI decades later, no one was paying attention.

The press, the public and the street had gone wild with stories of Liberace’s valuable jewels being stolen, then returned to him. Perhaps the Mob had been played by the Master, Liberace the Great.
EXHIBIT B

Contents

- Ex. B.1—
  The Liberace Tiffany Watch: Platinum, 10 opals, 67 diamonds forming the “L”

- Ex. B.2—
  Newspaper articles chronicling the events in the press, enlarged to 3’x5’

- Ex. B.3—
  FBI file pages describing the heist, the reactions, the insurance, and the history of the piece as later disclosed by Liberace, enlarged to 3’x5’
EXHIBIT ITEM B.1

The Liberace Tiffany & Co. Pocket Watch

- Platinum
- 10 Opals
- 67 Diamonds
EXHIBIT ITEM B.2

Dallas Times Herald Articles about the Heist

$75,000 theft shakes Liberace

Jewelry stolen here

Continued From Page 1

Dallas exec indicted in Dallas burglaries

Dallas Times Herald

To police, officers from the Crimes Against Property Section of the Criminal Investigation Division will work the case.

He finished the list with a Rambo-type signature.

The last Liberace compiled:

- One camera, $25;
- One jade pen, carved and set in gold with the name Liberace spelled in diamonds, $8,500;
- One Navajo cross, $500; one 14-karat gold coin hanging on a gold chain with emeralds around the edge, $2,250; one set of gold, diamond and pearl cuff links, $1,200; one set of ruby cuff links, $4,000; one Mickey Mouse wrist watch, $200; one "La Cloche" diamond wrist watch, $300, and one gold necklace, $100.

Also, one ring, three-color gold, $350; two gold pendant-shaped pill containers, $300; one gold elephant pendant with diamonds on the neck and emerald in the eyes, $3,000; one set of planished-shaped cuff links, $90; one gold and topaz ring, $1,000; one gold ring with a "Laguna" stone, $2,000; one set of gold and agate cuff links, $1,200; one Tiffany diamond watch with "I'll Be Seeing You" set in diamonds, $12,500, and one Tiffany cross, $5,300.

Dallas Times Herald

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EXHIBIT ITEM B.3

FBI Affidavit

STATE OF ILLINOIS  
COUNTY OF COOK

AFFIDAVIT

ROBERT A. KEANE, Special Agent, Federal Bureau of Investigation, being duly sworn, states:

1. On April 2, 1974, a court order was entered authorizing the interception of wire communications on telephone numbers (312) 368-1647, (312) 368-1668 and (312) 368-1669, located at Suite 604, Sixth Floor, 5 North Wabash, Chicago, Illinois.

2. On April 17, 1974, a conversation was intercepted from telephone number (312) 368-1647, wherein Adolph Levin was called by Herbie Levin. During this conversation Levin asked if Levin came down in price, to which Levin replied that the low price was "fifteen". Levin asked "What size" and Levin replied a regular pocket watch, platinum. Levin asked if it was 18 or 12 size. Levin then asked do you want it in inches. A silence was then heard. An unidentified male in the background then asked Levin if the man on the phone was a customer and Levin replied affirmatively. The unidentified male asked if that was the Liberace watch and Levin replied affirmatively. Levin then described the watch to Herbie as he apparently was measuring it, as a platinum pocket watch 1 5/8 inches in diameter on which were numerous diamonds totalling 5.25 karats.

3. On March 5, 1974, the Dallas Texas office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation advised me that between 7:00 P.M. February 14, 1974 and 12:45 A.M. February 15, 1974, jewelry totalling $27,000 belonging to Lee Liberace was stolen from Liberace's Statler-Hilton Hotel suite in Dallas, Texas. Included in this theft was one platinum pocket watch valued at $5,500, with roman numerals laid out with diamonds of a total weight of 45 points. On the back of the watch was the script letter "L" laid out in diamonds, approximate weight 1.25 ct.

4. Special Agent James Dewhurst advised me that a confidential informant stated on March 20, 1974 that he [confidential informant] had been to Levin's place of business on various occasions and observed Levin discuss over the telephone the buying and selling of stolen jewelry. The confidential informant further stated that on March 9, 1974, he had seen 1,000-1,500 14k gold "Princess" rings bearing the manufacturer's initials BMH, which Levin had indicated were part of a "load" he had just received. The confidential informant told Agent Dewhurst who told me, that Adolph Levin is known as a jewelry fence who operates from Suite 604, 5 N. Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.
EXHIBIT ITEM B.3 cont.

FBI Special Agent Testimony

TO: SAC, LAS VEGAS
FROM: SAC, CHICAGO (87-61572)

ADOLPH LEWIN; UNUSU. THIEF OF $64,000 IN JEWELRY
FROM L. LIBERACE, 2/14-15/74, STATLER-HILTON HOTEL,
DALLAS, TEXAS, O: DALLAS.

RE LOS ANGELES KITEL TO CHICAGO DATED 3/30/74.
FOR INFORMATION LAS VEGAS, ON APRIL 17, 1974, CHICAGO
AGENTS ARRESTED ADOLPH LEWIN, DSA UNIVERSAL Gem AND
JEWELRY CO, INC., 5 NORTH RABASH AVENUE, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS,
IN POSSESSION OF LOT FROM TWO DALLAS BURGLARIES AND TWO
CHICAGO AREA BURGLARIES.

AMONG THE LOT WAS A PLATINUM TIFFANY POCKET WATCH
WHICH WAS TAKEN IN THE CAPTIONED BURGLARY.

LIFE DESIRES CURRENT MARKET VALUE FOR THIS WATCH.
LOST ANGEL S OFFICE ADVISED L. LIBERACE CLAIMS HE PURCHASED
INSTANT WATCH IN LAS VEGAS, NEVADA, UNKNOWN DATE, FROM
UNKNOWN OWNER OF LAS VEGAS JEWELRY STORE. WATCH WAS ON
DISPLAY IN WINDOW AND AT FIRST NOT FOR SALE. WATCH THEN

TAKEN TO

AND ADDED BAGUETTE CHAIN. LIBERACE ADVISED
WOULD HAVE INFORMATION INCLUDING DATE AND PURCHASE AMOUNT
WILL PLUS ADDITIONAL COSTS OF DIAMOND
REQUESTED TO CONTACT

IT IS

NOTED AT TIME OF THEFT A PADDLE CHAIN WAS ATTACHED TO
INSTANT WATCH BUT THESE ITEMS NOT RECOVERED AND
CONSEQUENTLY ONLY VALUE OF WATCH ITSELF DESCRIBED.

SUBMIT AND FOLLOW WITH FD-302.

Approved: Special Agent in Charge

THE PRIEST, THE HITMAN AND THE LIBERACE STRADIVARIUS

In 2011, Father Eugene Klein while administering communion to inmates, was slipped a note. It was stashed inside religious materials passed through a prison cell food slot to him by convicted Chicago hit man Frank Calabrese Sr. The note instructed the priest on the location of a hidden treasure in a former home of the notorious mobster, who was serving a life sentence for 13 murders.

Inside a sliding door and up against a wall in the home, the mobster told the priest, was hidden a 250-year old Stradivarius violin which had once belonged to Liberace, worth an estimated $26 million. Klein opted to look for the item himself without telling the police. He posed as a buyer for the home, but was discovered and arrested.

Calabrese died in prison in 2012 at age 75.

Famed Chicago prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald, renowned for taking down Illinois Governor Rob Blegojevich, went after the priest for Conspiracy to Defraud the US. Undeterred by the priest’s spotless record, the prosecutor put tremendous manpower into an elaborate case, lining the back of the courtroom with witnesses against the 65-year-old Father Klein as the trial was about to begin.

Then, Father Klein shocked the courtroom by changing his plea from not guilty to guilty, without any bargain made. When the action put the case back in the news, the Liberace Foundation contacted the attorney for the priest to let him know that the entire affair was likely a charade.

With less than 500 violins made by the master Stradivarius, and all of them accounted for, the chances that the violin in question is one of the many copies made hundreds of years later is over 97%.
Liberace played a spectacular piano solo on the Jack Benny Show in 1954. In a comedy act, he then introduced Jack Benny to join him for another number, in place of George, Liberace’s violinist brother. Jack Benny walked out on stage and raised the violin to his chin, revealing that it had a miniature candelabra attached to it. The crowd roared with laughter. That violin is in the Liberace Museum Collection. The brand is Stradivarius. There are another 3 violins in the collection, at least two of them are marked with the name Stradivarius.

The gag was repeated by Liberace and Jack Benny on the Jack Benny Show in 1969, to great response. In the second version, they even refer to the violin as a “Stradivarius made in Japan”.

“The Jack Benny Show” circa 1954
There is no evidence nor indication that Liberace ever bought, was given or owned an actual Stradivarius violin, other than the relatively cheap knockoffs used in his shows like these examples. In fact, there is nothing to indicate that Liberace ever owned any item or single piece of property worth anywhere near $26 million.

Far more likely is the notion that someone paid off a mobster with a stolen violin from the Liberace act, noting that it was a “Stradivarius” like those in the collection. The value was likely escalated by its nefarious owners from one to another, as the cache of Liberace grew with the notoriety of the Stradivarius name in the public domain.

Armed with this information for the sentencing of his client, the attorney for Father Klein called it “a classic Chicago Mob charade.” The sentencing is pending.

Scattered across the Internet, printed by dozens of media outlets is the story of the $26 million Liberace Stradivarius. The thief, the mobster, the priest, the prosecutor and the public remain to this very moment under the spell of the greatest showman of all time...
EXHIBIT C

Contents

• Ex. C.1—
  Various recent newspaper articles covering the story in all its fantastic intrigue

• Ex. C.2—
  Photographs of Frank Calabrese, Sr, Father Klein, and Jack Benny with Liberace

• Ex. C.3 (a, b, c)—
  Three “Stradivarius” violins owned by the Liberace Foundation, including the 1954 Jack Benny candelabra-violin

• Ex. C.4—
  Close view of the interior labels of the violins, showing the name “Stradivarius”

• Ex. C.5—
  Enlarged expert essay on the Stradivarius brand and the many fakes that followed

• Ex. C.6—
  Optional Jack Benny Show clips of Liberace and Jack Benny violin skits
The priest, the hit man & the violin

Chaplain allegedly plotted to help mobster sell million-dollar instrument

BY KIM JANSEN
Staff Reporter

A rare multimillion-dollar violin, reputedly made by Stradivarius and once owned by Liberace.

The aging mob hit man who hid it in the attic of his vacation home before he was locked up and placed under the tightest security the U.S. prison system can muster.

And a prison chaplain, who allegedly broke the law to try to help the mobster recover the instrument before authorities could find it.

It might sound like a plot rejected by "The Sopranos."

But every so often Chicago's federal courthouse serves up a real life drama so unlikely that even the most shameless Hollywood scriptwriter would cringe at its contrivance.

And on Wednesday, the long-awaited trial of 66-year-old Catholic priest Eugene Klein promises to be just such a show.

Prosecutors allege Klein — the former prison chaplain at the Federal Penitentiary in Springfield, Mo. — acted as a secret messenger for feared and prolific killer Frank Calabrese Sr., delivering notes the mob boss had written in solitary confinement, then hidden inside religious books, to an associate on the outside.

Together with that associate, Klein plotted to snatch back the violin and sell it, the feds allege. They say Klein "confessed" and gave them a note Calabrese had passed him through his prison cell door, describing how to find the hidden violin at his Wisconsin vacation home.

Klein doesn't dispute that he passed on the messages for Calabrese, who died in prison in 2012. But his attorney, Thomas Durkin, has ridiculed the case. He questions whether the violin, which has never been recovered, ever existed in the first place. And he hopes to convince U.S. District Judge John Darr that what's expected to be a four-day bench trial that Klein didn't conspire to violate the strict prison rules under which Calabrese was being held.

Convicted at the landmark 2007 "Family Secrets" trial, Calabrese, then 70, was sentenced to life in prison and ordered to pay $4 million to the families of his victims by a judge who said he was responsible for 13 mob hits.

In March 2011, Klein was caught on a security camera pocketing what he said was a candy bar that Calabrese had passed him through the slot in his cell door. Challenged by the feds, he "confessed," shared the note about the violin.

A search by federal agents of Calabrese's Oak Brook home in 2010 uncovered a secret basement compartment filled with cash and jewelry worth more than $1 million, and a certificate for a 1764 violin, described as a "Stradivari" but made by the lesser Giuseppe Antonio Artalli.

Klein faces up to 10 years in prison, if convicted.
EXHIBIT ITEM C.2

Photographs

Clockwise from top-left: George Liberace, Jayne Mansfield and Jack Benny on violins (1950s), Frank Calabrese, Sr. mug shot (1990), Liberace and Jack Benny (1954), Father Eugene Klein (2015)
EXHIBIT ITEMS C.3a, C.3b, C.3c

**Liberace Stradivarius Violins**

- Liberace and Jack Benny’s Candelabra Violin Prop
- A Liberace “Stradivarius” Violin
- A Liberace “Stradivarius” Violin
EXHIBIT ITEM

C.4

Close View of Violin Label
EXHIBITION DESIGN

- The footprint of all three exhibitions totals roughly 48 square feet.
- The ideal product is an acrylic print for enlarged documents pasted directly onto an exhibiting wall, and Plexiglas display cases for the watch and violins.
- An alternative for the enlarged documents is 3’x5’ foam-core boards on easels, this would add additional square feet to the exhibition.
- The design presented below is purely conceptual. The Liberace Foundation encourages the Mob Museum’s input in the layout, presentation and atmosphere of the proposed exhibition.
CONTACT

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