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Frank Cali, the Slain Gambino Boss, Was a 'Ghost' Who Avoided the Limelight

By Michael Wilson and Benjamin Weiser

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[The latest: A Gotti was released from prison, then the Gambino boss was killed. Is there a connection?]

Francesco Cali wore the label quietly: old school. The reputed boss of the Gambino crime family was nothing like John J. Gotti, the flashy “Dapper Don” who ruled the same operation when Mr. Cali was a young man.

He kept a low profile not just in his business dealings but in his Staten Island neighborhood. Yet he met the same bloody fate as many of his predecessors on Wednesday night, gunned down in the street outside his brick home in a brazen killing that recalled the mob wars of decades past.

Mr. Cali, 53, represented a shift in Gambino leadership in recent years, a boss who sought to avoid the limelight in favor of discreet meetings — face to face, no telephones — while at the same time reaching across the Atlantic and tapping Sicilian networks for foot soldiers and drugs, law enforcement officials said.

In short, he was “an earner,” one who brought to his leadership his relative youth and a reputation for spreading the wealth among the Gambino family while deftly avoiding the traps and wiretaps of law enforcement.

“He was the polar opposite of John Gotti,” said one law enforcement official who investigates the Mafia, speaking anonymously for security reasons. “He’s basically a ghost.”

None of those cautious instincts would serve him on Wednesday night. Investigators said it was too early to tell whether his killing was the latest twist in a decades-old power struggle inside the Gambino family, an outside attack or even mob-related at all.



Mr. Cali, 53, was shot six times outside his home in the Todt Hill section of Staten Island on Wednesday night. Stephanie Keith for The New York Times

Shortly after 9 p.m., a blue pickup truck backed into Mr. Cali's vehicle outside his home in the Todt Hill section of Staten Island, and Mr. Cali emerged from his home, the police said. There was a brief conversation before the driver opened fire with a handgun, firing 12 shots — “pow-pow-pow-pow-pow,” one neighbor said on Wednesday night. Mr. Cali was struck at least six times. Mortally wounded, he crawled under the rear of his vehicle.

It was unclear on Thursday whether the driver, described as being between 25 and 40 years old, struck Mr. Cali's vehicle to lure him outside, or whether the two men knew one another.

The bloody attack, in some ways, did not bear the hallmarks of hits from the past. Mafia hit men once considered it taboo to kill a rival at his home, near his family. It was also unusual in previous eras for a single gunman, rather than a team, to execute a high-ranking mobster.

And yet, even against its serene setting on Hilltop Terrace, with its stately homes, circular driveways and swimming pools, the image of Mr. Cali's body lying on the street was a throwback to the black-and-white photographs of Mafia assassinations past.

[Todt Hill, a getaway from the bustling city, offers privacy that has appealed to mob bosses.]

The last time the boss of a Mafia family was assassinated was in 1985. The former Gambino boss Paul Castellano was gunned down outside Sparks Steak House in Midtown, a power grab orchestrated by a young Mr. Gotti, who ran the family through the late 1980s in his trademark showy style.

Mr. Cali rose quickly through the ranks of the family, becoming a “made” member in the late 1990s, on the way to a “swift promotion” to acting captain in less than 10 years, a prosecutor, Joey Lipton, said at a 2008 detention hearing after Mr. Cali's arrest in an extortion case. In Federal District Court in Brooklyn, Mr. Lipton said Mr. Cali had “familial and blood ties” to the Gambino family, tracing back to Sicily.

His wife, Rosaria Inzerillo, had several relatives associated with the Gambino family, including her cousin, Tommy Gambino, court papers from that hearing said. Mr. Cali started out in a crew under a rising captain, John D. D'Amico, known as Jackie the Nose, who became the acting boss of the family around 2005.

Mr. Cali's swift rise did not please everyone. One Gambino soldier, Joey Orlando, was overheard on a wiretapped call that was disclosed at the hearing complaining about Mr. Cali, whom he described as “Jackie's guy,” becoming a captain in the organization.

"Jackie made him a skipper," Mr. Orlando was overheard saying. "Some snot-nosed, 30-year-old kid."

That "kid" would rise by 2014 to become the family's underboss, under the leader at the time, Domenico Cefalu, and a year later, would become the acting boss when Mr. Cefalu stepped down.

Prosecutors said Mr. Cali tapped his connections in Italy, importing many members and associates in his crew from Sicily, where he was seen as a man of "influence and power." In one wiretapped call, two mobsters speaking in Italian were overheard discussing Mr. Cali's status in New York. "He's a friend of ours," one said. "He is everything over there."

Mr. Cali's contacts with Italy were part of a broader trend in the 21st century of crime families importing Italian-born men, the law enforcement official said.

"They have what they believe are the old values, because the American-born kids don't have the right stuff anymore," the official said.

Mr. Cali was observed by law enforcement at Gambino family events as early as 1990, when he was in his 20s, prosecutors said. He was present at the wake of his famous predecessor, Mr. Gotti, who died of cancer in 2002 after a decade in prison, and at several other Gambino wakes in the years to come. Prosecutors said Mr. Cali's own Christmas party in 2007 included among its guests Mr. D'Amico and others from the family.

Mr. Cali was arrested only once, in the 2008 extortion case, a small part of a much broader indictment that charged dozens of Gambino family members, associates and others with a wide array of crimes.

The extortion case involved a failed attempt to build a Nascar track in Staten Island. The Gambino family controlled the trucking operation that would have hauled the dirt to fill the track's foundation. Mr. Cali pleaded guilty to extortion conspiracy in the case and was sentenced to 16 months in prison.

"As a client, Frank was smart, mild-mannered and low key," his lawyer at the time, Harlan J. Protass, said. "I feel terrible for his wife and children, who he loved very much."

John Gotti ran the Gambino family through the late 1980s in his trademark showy style.
Keith Meyers/The New York Times

Prosecutors in that case said Mr. Cali — at the time a captain in the family — committed other crimes for which he was never charged. He installed illegal Joker Poker video machines in a cafe in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, and split the profits with the cafe's owners after the requisite 10 percent cut for the Gambino family, according to the memo from the 2008 detention hearing.

He also took a percentage of the proceeds of an annual Italian feast in the neighborhood, and in the mid-1990s, was involved in a swindle related to selling calling cards with airtime minutes from telephone companies, a lucrative venture in the days before cellphones, the prosecutor's memo said.

In 2014, federal prosecutors identified Mr. Cali as an associate of Franco Lupoi, a Brooklyn baker suspected of playing a role in a heroin pipeline from Italy to the United States. The case attracted significant attention because it seemed to suggest that the Italian crime group behind the pipeline, 'Ndrangheta (pronounced n-DRANG-gay-tah), was seeking to expand to New York, something the authorities said was a new development.

Mr. Cali had substantial real estate holdings in the Dominican Republic, where he sometimes vacationed. He also owned a business that imported tomato sauce, olive oil and mineral water, and opened a large fruit store in Brooklyn, and later an Italian supermarket.

On Hilltop Terrace, he was remembered as a decent but private neighbor. "He waved to me, I wave to him, I don't ask no questions," said Mike Deluca, whose house was behind Mr. Cali's.

Mr. Cali rose to power largely by avoiding detection, law enforcement officials said. Other captains were not allowed to call him directly, and he avoided speaking on the phone. He chose to meet in person. "Cali did not have to get his hands dirty," Mr. Lipton said in court.

For a Mafia boss, Mr. Cali did not have a reputation for violence. "I never heard of Frankie ever having a fist fight, let alone killing anybody," said one former Gambino family member, who has testified in federal court for the government in several organized crime trials.

The Gambino family was once the nation's largest and most influential organized crime group, but several of its leaders were convicted in the 1990s of crimes that included murder and racketeering. Mr. Cali's death arrives amid a recent spate of violence in the Mafia underworld, including the assassination of a reputed Bonanno crime family associate at the drive-through window of a McDonald's in the Bronx.

The chain of events in the underworld is "more than we generally have seen in the last couple years," the chief of detectives of the New York Police Department, Dermot Shea, said on Thursday. "And all of this will be part of the investigation going forward."

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